

## THE SACRED FLESH: ON CAMUS'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE BODY

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By

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A Thesis

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies

McMaster University

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Ph.D. McMaster University  
(Religious Studies) Hamilton, Ontario

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vii, 308

The focus of my thesis concerns what I refer to as Camus's 'philosophy of the body.' This study in part addresses the scholarly debate about how his texts are related. Camus himself says of certain writers that their "books form a whole, 'in which each is to be understood in relation to the others, and in which they are all interdependent.'" <sup>1</sup> If this understanding of authorship equally applies to Camus's works, the question concerns linkage. What underlies this wholeness? Broadly speaking, there are three approaches to understanding the relation between his texts: thematic, philosophic, and existential. None of these ways is truly independent of the other. Each emphasizes a different aspect of Camus's project. He is an artist, thinker and man. Once again we are returned to the question of linkage. The thematic approach tends to absolutize one mood or insight, though Camus cautions against this. The philosophical approach generally reads the texts dialectically. But Camus's interest is in our living experience, not in a flight of the intellect. An existential approach, understood correctly, concerns not a theory of but a meditation on our concrete existence. If Camus's works are read together as a sustained meditation on existence, the integrity of the artist, thinker and man is preserved. Each facet – beauty, truth and life – is held in a working tension as opposed to absolutizing or subsuming any one aspect. Still the question remains. What underlies this integrity? Quite literally, the body. I argue that Camus's life work evokes a new way of seeing, thinking and speaking about the body. In this dissertation, then, I look at various ways in which the body is manifested across a selection of his essays and novels. I also consider what might be some of the implications of such manifestations.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Thody, *Albert Camus*. MacMillan Modern Novelists, Gen. Ed. Norman Page (London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1989), 18.

### *The acknowledgements*

McMaster University for their generous support and for allowing me the honour of acting in the capacity of Teaching Assistant. My committee members – Zdravko Planinc, my supervisor, whom fortune put in my way; Travis Kroeker for his erudition; and Dana Hollander for the constant challenge. Doreen Drew, Sheryl Dick and Jennifer Nettleton for their goodwill, guidance and the occasional beer. Professors with whom I have had the pleasure to study, TA or simply speak. Finally, my colleagues and 701 cronies for some fine conversations.

My family – my great good fortune. Shirley Yoxall, whom fortune sent my way. The Hatsons and the Bunneys for their love and graciousness. Gyongyi Hegedus to whom I will send my congratulations always. Tony Calcagno for being amongst those who encouraged me to undertake this task. Fadi Abourihan for his support my first couple of years back. And Stephanie Balkwill, my friend, for dinners, movies and time. Welcome, Jaouad.

For Shirley

The flesh, the poor flesh, miserable, dirty, faded, humiliated. The sacred flesh.

*Carnets*, March 1959  
Albert Camus

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... the end of the absurd, rebellious, etc., movement, the end of the contemporary world consequently, is compassion in the original sense; in other words, ultimately love and poetry. But that calls for an innocence I no longer have. All I can do is recognize the way leading to it and be receptive to the time of the innocents. To see it, at least, before dying.

*Carnets 1942-1951*  
Camus

**Prologue: *The Time of the Innocents***

### **Prologue: *The Time of the Innocents***

#### *A meditation in the medium of the myth*

There is some debate amongst Camus scholars as to how his texts, which consist of notebooks, novels, plays, essays, newspaper and journal articles, relate to each other. Camus himself says of certain writers that their “books form a whole, ‘in which each is to be understood in relation to the others, and in which they are all interdependent.’”<sup>1</sup> If this understanding of authorship equally applies to Camus’s creations, the question then is one of linkage. What is it that constitutes or underlies the integrity of the works of Camus?

Very broadly speaking, there appear to be three approaches to understanding what might link his texts – thematic, philosophic, and existential. Clearly none of these ways is truly independent of the other. Each emphasizes a different possible aspect of Camus’s project. He is an artist, thinker and man. But once again, then, we are returned to the question of linkage – how are these aspects of Camus related through his works? The thematic approach tends to absolutize one mood or insight and witnesses to its repetition across the works. This is a possible way of understanding the coherence of Camus’s project, though he did warn against such absolutizing. The philosophic approach tends to argue that the texts are related dialectically, issuing in a synthetic truth, higher or purer presumably. His first interest, however, is in our lived reality, not in a flight of the intellect. The existential approach of Camus, properly understood, concerns not a theory of existence but a meditation on our concrete existence. If his works are a sustained

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Thody, *Albert Camus* (London: MacMillan Publishers, 1989), 19. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Thody.

meditation on existence, the artist and intellectual are equally part of the man. Each facet – beauty, truth and life – is held in a tension in this third approach, as opposed to absolutizing any one aspect. Still the question remains – what underlies this unity? How are these three aspects linked? Quite literally by ‘the body’, that is, they are organically related. In brief, I suggest Camus’s work evokes a new way of seeing, thinking and speaking about ‘the body.’ In this dissertation, then, I intend to look at the various ways in which the body is manifested across a selection of his essays and novels. I will also consider what might be some of the implications of such manifestations. First, however, a closer look at the scholarly context is necessary.

In an essay entitled “The Fall: The Flight,” Maurice Blanchot compares Camus’s early and late novels, *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Fall* (1956). Between these two works he sees continuity both in mood and in the abiding recognition of life as ‘absurd’. The difference he says is merely one of degree: by the time of the second anti-hero, things are simply worse.<sup>2</sup> In short, with Blanchot, one could suggest a thematic continuity in the elaboration of an original philosophic insight into ‘the absurdity of existence.’ However, Camus repeatedly asserts that ‘the absurd’ is a starting point, not the content or the end of his thought. If all subsequent works are read through this initial lens without letting each work first stand on its own and speak out of its own integrity, the project is stunted. Arguably, Camus neither abandons the truths of any phase nor absolutizes the truth of any one phase.

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “The Fall: The Flight,” trans. Alba Amoia. In *Critical Essays on Albert Camus*, ed. Bettina L. Knapp (Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), 140-45.

If this is the case, how are the beginning and end of his work related? In his essay “The Myth [1943] and The Rebel [1951]: *Diversity and Unity*”, Donald Lazere suggests that Camus’s early and late works are dialectically linked.<sup>3</sup> It is not an absolute continuity, then, but rather a synthetic truth at which Camus arrives over the course of his works. Camus, however, claims that ‘the time for abstraction is over.’ He professes a desire to return to the concrete, to living experience, to what can be referred to as our ‘first truth’, that of the body. He is a decidedly and determinedly concrete thinker. Does a dialectical account do justice to the concreteness Camus is trying to maintain in thinking?

Alternatively, in *Camus: A Theological Perspective*, James Woelfel simply asserts the existence of a contradiction between *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *L’Homme révolté* and lets it stand as such. He does not seek its reconciliation through a dialectical process. While he allows that Camus denies such a contradiction, he attributes this denial, and thus the contradiction, to a certain lack of lucidity on the part of Camus.<sup>4</sup> He suggests that Camus’s ethics of revolt of the second cycle, in which the value of human life is disclosed as the “*sine qua non* of all values” (98), would have been served better had Camus recognized that the ethics of the absurd of the first cluster, which asserts a radical moral relativism, that is, indifferentism, had been superseded in the second cycle. I think it possible to argue that what appear to be disjuncts, however they are expressed, need to

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Lazere, “*The Myth and The Rebel: Diversity and Unity*,” in *Modern Critical Views: Albert Camus*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 61-78. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Bloom.

<sup>4</sup> James W. Woelfel, *Camus: A Theological Perspective* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1975), 94. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Woelfel.

be held together in a type of tension – neither an overcoming in a dialectics of reconciliation nor a mere dismissal.

What appear to be disjuncts, I suggest, are merely expressions of our concrete existence, of the existence of you, I and the world. The radical diversity of the concrete in opposition to our desire for unity is never, in living reality, ‘reconciled’ in a ‘dialectical synthesis’. Nor, as Woelfel holds, is there a necessary contradiction between a perspectival ethics and one of objective valuation. Nor for that matter between an ethics of indifferentism, as Camus’s ethics in the *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* may be considered, and that in *L’Homme révolté* in which he asserts a value by which we can judge an action. In principle, that is, in theory, these two positions do indeed represent a contradiction. But in living reality, one is confronted with a choice at times. One can remain within what Camus refers to as an absurd reasoning, asserting the equivalence of all actions, that is, one can remain in radical solitude. Or one can choose to assert the value of life which implies the other’s life as well as my own. Indifferentism is ultimately an expression of despair. Valuing existence requires courage. Again, in theory these two positions are contradictory. In living reality, however, which is Camus’s interest, these can be considered two possible orientations toward our (shared) existence. Theoretically, the position taken in the second cycle may well supersede that of the former. Existentially, however, the two positions can and often do co-exist in the very same person.

I argue that Camus holds the disjuncts in a tension through what Pierre Hadot refers to as an “*askēsis* of desire.”<sup>5</sup> Briefly, the *askēsis* of desire concerns a recognition of and respect for our natural limits and necessities. Thus, through a practice of *askēsis*, Camus is able to hold together, in a working tension, our natural diversity and our desire for unity; our perspectival and simultaneously communal reality; and the living reality of despair and courage. Through this same exercise, Camus recognizes that at times one need make a choice between despair and courage. Is this a contradiction in living reality?

As opposed to a thematic or dialectic approach, I suggest that a concern with living practices may be more reflective of the concreteness Camus was trying to express. In *Anamnesis*, Eric Voegelin considers Camus’s project a type of exercise as well. He claims that “from the very first the work was deliberately designed with a view to a meditation in the medium of the myth. In the degree in which [Camus’s] quest through knowledge is illumined, the mood of existence changes.”<sup>6</sup> He further suggests that through the medium of the myth, and over the course of his works, Camus comes to truth and to the possibility of again creating ‘a living home in time.’ In short, Camus’s project can be understood as a new odyssey.

Following Voegelin’s lead, it is useful to look at the plan of work Camus laid out for himself. Over the course of his works, Camus continuously developed and refined what he refers to as his ‘cycles,’ a term first used to classify a series of epic poems written by Greek poets to supplement Homer’s tale of the Trojan War. Each cycle of

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 117. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Hadot.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. Gerhart Niemeyer (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 190. Hereafter cited in the body of the text as Voegelin.



Camus's writings, generally consisting in an essay, novel and play, is drawn together under a unifying rubric. In a mid-1950 entry in *Carnets 1942-1951*, Camus once again outlines a life plan for his literary output:

- I. The Myth of Sisyphus (absurd)
- II. The Myth of Prometheus (revolt)
- III. The Myth of Nemesis<sup>7</sup>

Each cycle is centred on the mythic figure of the respective rubric and on both the event and the mood of the event for which each is remembered. The task of Sisyphus, to roll a rock unceasingly, is pointless, and his perpetual punishment in the Underworld lies in precisely this. It is the meaningfulness of such repetition which gives rise to the sense of the absurd. Out of his love for humanity, Prometheus rebels against the gods and delivers the arts and all the sciences to mankind. He is punished for 30 years before being pardoned. Amongst other crimes, both Sisyphus and Prometheus challenge the gods. Both figures thereby overstep their limits as men. The third figure and event thus naturally come into view, that of Nemesis. While she is commonly referred to as the goddess of retribution, her original act of restoring balance is better recalled by considering her the goddess of moderation.

In a notebook entry of late 1951 or early 1952, Camus defines what he means by 'moderation': "They consider it the resolution of contradiction. It cannot be anything other than the affirmation of contradiction and the heroic decision to stay with it and to survive it" (NB/51: 21). And in a much earlier entry of 1947, Camus writes: "Nemesis – goddess of moderation. All those who have gone beyond the limit will be pitilessly

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<sup>7</sup>Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 168. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as NB/42. [*Carnets, 1942-1951*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964.]

destroyed” (NB/42: 102). As I will discuss in what follows, by ‘limit’ Camus means justice. More precisely, and strictly speaking, there is no justice according to Camus. There are only limits. The three figures, Sisyphus, Prometheus and Nemesis, are united by the notion of limit, then – limits denied, overstepped and restored. But which notion of limit is the one that concerns Camus? I suggest it is that of ‘the body.’

My interest in the body as a theme in Camus’s works arose while reading them chronologically. As one progresses, one cannot but be struck by the simplicity of his project. In the midst of the ruins of Europe that *was* the Second World War, Camus asks his guiding question: of what can I be certain? This is what he refers to as his ‘Cartesian moment,’ which entails doubt as a method, not as its content. Camus’s answer is equally simple. I can be certain of what I can touch, that is, of sea, rock and flesh. Thematically, this is arguably the centre of Camus’s works. There really can be nothing simpler than this. ‘Body’ is our first experience, our ‘first truth.’ Yet it takes Camus an abbreviated lifetime to begin to say it. Indeed, he felt always that he had not even begun to address it. And what of it, once it is said? To what does this ‘fidelity to the concrete’ testify?

Camus’s passion is the concrete, and his work is a sustained labour to remain with the concrete. He is concerned with our experience, rather than with formulating theories about it. Thus he speaks always of our living experience, however it manifests itself. As it is living experience with which he is caught up, with necessity he speaks of the body in whatever way it manifests itself in the experience to which he is witnessing. There is a serious methodological difficulty in approaching the body in Camus’s works, then. How

to speak about it in language which does not immediately objectify it? Which is neither reified nor so laden that it cannot bear the very simple reality Camus is trying to address?

The first and most glaring difficulty is stating the problem – ‘the body’. This word invokes a culture of sabotage: body and soul; the spirit in the machine; materialism. To speak of the ‘natural body’ at this point in our history implies already having stepped out of it, beyond it, in order to reconstruct what is the first given. To speak of the ‘animal body’ is better, perhaps, but in the West we have already severed the animal from the human from the divine. How to recover the animal body? Originally, the term ‘animal,’ from *animus*, simply meant ‘animated being,’ any animated being. A divide was introduced at some point such that to be an animated being, to be alive, was and is reduced to an animal act, to something beneath the human. Perhaps this attenuation of language is reflective of the way the body manifests itself in the Western culture. This concern with language, a central aspect of Camus’s project, will also be considered then. So too will his style.

In testifying to the concrete in the only way possible, concretely, Camus is not a philosopher’s philosopher. He is a thinker and an artist, and a witness in both roles. Through reflection and story, Camus’s works trace this process of attenuation in the Western tradition. His work is simultaneously an attempt to return to that which has never really disappeared, animated being, but for whose literal survival he was concerned. The creature and the creation. Flesh, sun, sea and rock. Contrary to what some have claimed, this is not mere nostalgia for a ‘pagan origin.’ Rather, it reflects

Camus's profession that 'the time for abstraction is over.' In a 1946 lyrical essay entitled "Prometheus in the Underworld," Camus claims that

I sometimes doubt whether men can be saved today. But it is still possible to save their children, both body and mind.... [A]ny mutilation of man can only be temporary, and... we serve nothing in man if we do not serve the whole of man.<sup>8</sup>

It is possible to read his works collectively as a sustained attempt to testify and give witness to the fact that in the scientific, philosophical and theological traditions of the West, the body has already been buried or is about to be. The rest is post-mortem, eulogy, memorial: definition, defamation, desecration. Language is held hostage by abstraction and thus the body is made to disappear. That which exists – the actual, the natural, is lost to history: theology, philosophy, science. What of our living experience? Camus does not speak *about* the body. Indeed, he rarely uses this term. Rather, the body, that is, the whole man, slowly comes into view across his works.

*Camus's profession: On the body's odyssey*

By 'body,' I believe Camus intends 'nature,' that is, the creature and the creation. And I suggest that Camus's works, considered as a whole, concern the slow recovery of the body. A study of this recovery demands a consideration of the roots of its eclipse in the Western tradition, which, Camus argues, begins with the Christian revolution inaugurated by Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in the 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. It also entails an

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Camus, "Prometheus in the Underworld," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody and trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 138-142. The quote is found on pp. 141-2. This piece is included in Camus's third collection of lyrical essays entitled *L'Été (Summer)*, published in 1954. *Summer* is included in its entirety in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, pp. 107-181. Hereafter, references from *Lyrical and Critical Essays* will be cited in the body of the paper as LCE.

examination of its effects, which, Camus asserts, consists in the condition of nihilism reached in the West by the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Camus's first and only academic work, his diploma dissertation of 1936 entitled *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme*, considers the influence of Plotinus's method and Neo-Platonic categories on Augustine's reading of 'a religious way of thinking,' that of evangelical Christianity.<sup>9</sup> In his thesis, Camus attempts to discern "what constituted the originality of Christianity with regard to Hellenism" (Dis 93). While writing his dissertation, he simultaneously wrote a series of essays which were expressive of his pagan sensibility. As will be discussed in this thesis, I believe that it is at this point that Camus enters a dialogue with the Western tradition. I also hold that his primary interlocutor is Augustine, from his first essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, right through to *La Chute*, the last novel he published before his untimely death in 1960.

I argue that the trajectory Camus follows is consequent to that taken by Augustine and as such, I consider it a 'mirror trajectory.' The inexorable disembodiment of European thought and the West's descent into nihilism, which begins with Augustine, is undergone by Camus. Camus's trajectory thus begins with the loss of the first truth, that of the body. This loss is epitomized in a notebook entry written in mid-to-late 1947. In distinction from the lyrical essays written between 1935 and 1937, which can be considered love prose-poems to nature, Camus notes that "I have read through all these

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<sup>9</sup> Albert Camus, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, in *Albert Camus: Philosopher and Littérateur*, trans. by Joseph McBride (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 141. Subsequent references to Camus's dissertation will appear in the body of the paper as Dis. ["*Métaphysique chrétienne et Néoplatonisme*." Paris: Gallimard and Calmann Lévy, 1965.] References to Joseph McBride's essay on Camus's dissertation, also found in *Albert Camus: Philosopher and Littérateur*, will be cited as McBride.

cahiers – from the first one. What leaped to my eyes is that landscapes disappear, little by little. The modern cancer is eating me away too” (NB/42: 106-7). For Camus, landscapes – sun, sea and rock – and the human being standing before him, are his ‘bread and wine.’ Their slow disappearance from his notebooks reflects that which Camus underwent during his time in the North. His works are an odyssey of recovery, however, not of lament.

This paper is divided into three sections, the first two of which are identified by Camus’s unifying rubrics. The first section, entitled ‘Myth of Sisyphus,’ concerns the absurd and covers selected texts written between 1935 and 1943. In these first two chapters, I will consider the intertextuality of Camus’s works and the notion of dialogue, which I believe is the underlying logic of Camus’s approach. I will also look at the following texts: the early lyrical essays; his dissertation; and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and its companion novel, *L’Étranger*. The second section, ‘Myth of Prometheus,’ consists in two chapters which deal with Camus’s concept of revolt. In these chapters I will examine the relevant analytic works written between 1943 and 1951, as well as the companion novel *La Peste*. The third section breaks with this imitative framework as the last text I will consider, Camus’s 1956 novel *La Chute*, falls outside of the life plan of his works. The book stands alone and appears to be a recapitulation of his work until this point. Allowing that the beginning and the provisional end are entailed by the novel, this section is entitled ‘Book of Genesis.’ The epilogue, ‘Myth of Nemesis,’ returns us to Camus’s life plan, which arguably concerns the restoration of Western man to the limits of the body.

When speaking of the human being in this paper, instead of using the locution ‘the body’ I could use the term ‘first man,’ the title of Camus’s posthumously published and still incomplete last novel. The scientist would claim precedence, though. He would, however, be in a close fight with the theologian and the philosopher. The ‘first man’ has been eclipsed. The creature has gone underground. But she remains. Again, Camus asks of what he can be certain after all the structures have collapsed. Just as he stood in the midst of the ruins of the Western culture in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so we stand in the aftershock of the carnage his generation witnessed. The question remains, then: of what can we be certain? Camus’s answer bears scrutiny – there is the world, you and I. The question, of course, is what this might mean.

*Olives*

Sometimes the taste of these strong olives cured slowly in oil,  
with cloves of garlic, bay leaves and chillies and lemon and salt,  
conjures a whiff of a bygone age: rocky crannies,  
goats, shade and the sound of pipes,  
the tune of the breath of primeval times. The chill of a cave, a hidden cottage  
in a vineyard, a lodge in a garden, a slice of barley bread and well water.  
You are from there. You have lost your way.  
Here is exile. Your death will come, and lay a knowing hand on your shoulder.  
Come, it's time to go home.

*the Same Sea*  
Amos Oz

**Section 1: *Myth of Sisyphus***



## Chapter 1

### *Timely meditations: An introduction*

Exactly 60 years after the completion of Camus's essay, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1941), Martha Nussbaum wrote in the preface to the second edition of her book, *The Fragility of Goodness*:

Few of us now believe that we live in a world that is providentially ordered for the sake of the overall good; few even believe in a teleology of human social life moving toward greater perfection. And yet, or so it seemed and seems to me, the contemporary ethical consequences of granting that we live in a world that is in large part indifferent to our strivings had not been fully investigated. *Fragility* was thus also intended as one preliminary step in such an investigation.<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, both the Judeo-Christian worldview or metaphysic and Modernity's metaphysic, which can be understood crudely as the replacement of God and Eternity with Reason and History, are blithely dismissed. On this account, it seems that now all of us are able to grant at least the idea of a largely indifferent universe, even if we have yet to consider the ethical consequences of such a metaphysic.

This same understanding of reality, that of the indifference of the universe toward our strivings, was, a short 60 years ago, a source of great anxiety for Camus and his contemporaries, such as Jaspers and Sartre, and their immediate predecessors, namely, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Ignoring the consequences of such cataclysmic shifts in cultural consciousness is indicative, I suggest, of precisely what these late 19<sup>th</sup> and early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers felt they were confronting – the experience of nihilism.

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<sup>10</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xv.

Nussbaum returns to Greek ethical thought concerning luck and human vulnerability, as expressed by the philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and their predecessors, the tragic poets, both as source and resource for rethinking contemporary ethics. Certainly in a universe now envisioned as indifferent, good fortune and bad, or what the Christian tradition has understood in terms of blessedness, evil and suffering, must be reconsidered. Importantly, involved in Nussbaum's account of ethics is an effort to balance the cognitive role of both emotion and reason, dismissing neither as source and resource. To articulate this more holistic account of ethics, in *The Fragility of Goodness* she uses the tragic poets to express lyrically the lived reality of ethics in a universe indifferent, indeed at times apparently inimical, to human striving.

Camus too quite naturally, however differently, turned to Greek thought and tragedy both as source and resource. In *Albert Camus: The Literature of Revolt*, John Cruickshank notes that

in an interview which [Camus] gave some years ago he still described himself as being conscious of bearing a special responsibility because he was born, during the Christian era, in a land of strongly surviving pagan traditions. He said that the circumstances of his birth made him feel a closer affinity with the values of the ancient world than with Christian values.<sup>11</sup>

Born in 1913 amongst the *Pieds noirs*, the poor French whites of Algeria, Camus was raised in the then still largely pagan culture of Algeria. He was educated, however, in the logic of the West, that is, in the European tradition which at that time was still largely Judeo-Christian in valuation though offered in secular packaging. This heritage resulted in a self-description of one who has 'a pagan nature with Christian concerns.' The

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<sup>11</sup> John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 22-23. Hereafter cited in the body of the text as Cruickshank.

contradiction arising from this intersection of cultures, that of a pagan sensibility with largely European intellectual interests, was lived by Camus, by accident of birth and education and due to the further vicissitudes of history. Given the latter, he spent most of his adult life in the North in France, returning to Algeria only intermittently. In the role of a journalist in Algeria in 1940, his critical views concerning the treatment of the Arabs in colonial Algeria earned him exile from his country. He went to Paris for work, where his movements for the next few years were largely determined by occupation forces – of France by the Germans in 1940, and of Algeria by the Allies in 1942. Having begun to establish himself amongst the French intellectuals, he stayed on in France after the war,

He was introduced to the French intelligentsia through his first published novel, *L'Étranger*, and his philosophical essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, published in 1942 and 1943 respectively. Both texts, however differently, consider the general climate or overriding sensibility that he felt defined his era – that of the absurd. Briefly, the absurd sensibility is born of an impasse. According to Camus, the intellectually honest person recognizes both our desire to understand the universe and the intransigence of that universe against which we pit our reason. The absurd is the third which results from this clash of our finite reason and the reality which transcends it, that is, the world which is indifferent to our strivings. In *Le Mythe*, Camus attempts to enumerate the ethical consequences of such an awareness. The first consequence and our response to it is pivotal. He asks, if the world is indifferent to our strivings, if it frustrates our deepest desire, which is to feel at home in the universe, and if ultimately we live only to die, is life worth living?

As noted above, he too looks toward the Greeks, that is, to Hellenistic philosophy<sup>12</sup> and Greek tragedy, as source and resource for rethinking ethical and political being. In an April 1948 entry in *Carnets 1942-1951*, Camus writes: “If, to outgrow nihilism, one must return to Christianity, one may well follow the impulse and outgrow Christianity in Hellenism” (NB/42: 183). Over the course of his works, he simultaneously grappled with the immediate existential consequences of experiencing the universe as indifferent to our strivings, that is, with what was understood 60 years ago as the experience of nihilism, and with the possibility of ethical and political being. In a January 1951 notebook entry Camus writes: “Go back to the passage from Hellenism to Christianity, the true and only turning point in history...” (NB/42: 267). He examines this shift in his 1951 essay *L’Homme révolté*, where he develops a genealogy of nihilism. He also continued to consider its implications and the possible paths of recovery in the forms of both play and novel.

Again, 60 years later this understanding of the universe as indifferent to our strivings is ‘granted’ by Nussbaum. Yet just over 60 years ago, Camus had at least one nervous breakdown and fought suicidal depressions in relation to this problem. It is the brevity of this interval that disturbs me. In a brief 60 years, there appears to have emerged almost an indifference to this indifferent universe. Why have the consequences not been considered? Has the culture adapted such that this ‘general awareness’ has resulted in a new metaphysic or are we simply oblivious to the implications of such an awareness? And what are the implications of such oblivion?

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that Camus refers to the whole of Ancient Greek thought in terms of Hellenism and its decline rather than in terms of the classical periodisation.

It need be noted here, too, that over the last twenty-five years or so there has been a resurgence of religion in the West, at least in terms of identity politics. Consider, for example, the school of Radical Orthodoxy and thinkers such as John Milbank. Simultaneously, there is the development of what is called secular theology, as for example in the work of Giorgio Agamben. Amongst these latter thinkers there appears to be an adoption and adaptation of originally Judeo-Christian concepts, such as apocalypse and messianic time. It is to be wondered what limits such concepts have without their original frame, that is, without their original limits. I think it reasonable to ask if the more virulent strand of the religious resurgence in the West is a response of sorts to cultural oblivion as opposed to an all but ‘general awareness’ of a universe indifferent to our strivings. Oblivion is always more dangerous than awareness and, of course, easier. Camus was concerned with just such oblivion in terms of habit or the relapse into our daily routine after a brief awakening to what he took to be the reality of an indifferent universe. It is in light of this possibility that the brevity disturbs me. Thus it is also in light of this that Camus’s meditation on the consequences of such an experience of the universe remains timely.

*Ariadne’s Thread and Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

In this first chapter, I will set out in very broad terms the larger picture through which I am viewing Camus’s works as a whole, with a special emphasis on his essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. This essay, which concerns the absurd sensibility, as well as all his other texts, can only be understood within a wider context which is at the same time personal, historical and intertextual. The simultaneity of these factors creates a

methodological problem when examining Camus's works. That is, they render problematic the question of where to enter into a study of his thought. As noted in the prologue, Camus's works form an organic whole. Remaining with this image, all paths lead toward the centre of his work, not toward an end. But, if all threads logically lead to the centre, which one ought one to follow to reach it? Where should one enter this corpus? Camus's comments on the creative life in *Le Mythe* help illuminate the methodological problem at hand.

As a point of entry, there is an obvious historical dynamism to a thinker's works, but for Camus this dynamism is not absolute, that is, it is not strictly linear. In fact, Camus constantly returns to old problems, as a "profound thought is in a constant state of becoming; it adopts the experience of a life and assumes its shape. Likewise, a man's sole creation is strengthened in its successive and multiple aspects: his works."<sup>13</sup> He also contradicts himself across texts, often more than once. Of this he says that a creator's works,

one after another, ... complement one another, correct or overtake one another, contradict one another too. If something brings creation to an end, it is not the victorious and illusory cry of the blinded artist: 'I have said everything', but the death of the creator which closes his experience and the book of his genius. (103-4)

In spite of Camus's remarks on creation and a thinker's body of work, there has been a tendency to study *Le Mythe* in isolation from the whole of his works, except perhaps from those of *L'Étranger* and *Caligula*, which complete Camus's first cycle or

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<sup>13</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1975), 103. As the first and second chapters focus on *Le Mythe*, further references to it will be cited in the body of the paper merely by page number. In subsequent chapters, citations appearing in the body of the text will be identified as MS. [*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1942.]

cluster on the notion of the absurd.<sup>14</sup> This may in part stem from the nature of *Le Mythe* itself, as the text does appear to stand alone. It begins in the midst of the ruins of the Western culture in the late 1930's, early 1940's, and, like Nietzsche, Camus tries to clear the rubble in order to see what can be seen. He does not, however, carry out a genealogy of the continuing crisis in this text. He addresses that task in *L'Homme révolté*. In *Le Mythe* he examines the 'metaphysic,' that is, the emotional climate or experience of the universe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century West, a climate others of his era examine as well – that of the sensibility of the absurd. He argues that while he and his contemporaries basically begin from the same awareness or sensibility, the consequences they draw are profoundly different. The text appears to be self-contained then – an examination of a particular metaphysic during a particular period in history, with a select number of responses to it.

But Camus's texts are also implicitly contextualized, largely through intertextuality.<sup>15</sup> If intertextual references are overlooked, some of the complexity of Camus's work may be missed. For example, apart from references to the religious existential philosophers in *Le Mythe*, there is also a somewhat enigmatic reference to 'the churchmen' at a point. Precisely who Camus intends by this title is unclear. However, if one reads *Le Mythe* with an ear to intertextuality, which I suggest one must in order to do justice to the density of his work, it becomes clear that the Christian metaphysic is present throughout this essay. Indeed, and as noted in the prologue to this paper, I would

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<sup>14</sup> His play, *La Malentendu*, was included in this cycle by Camus, but more through default than by design. The text was originally intended for the second cluster which concerns revolt. In the end, however, it more clearly exemplified the absurd. For Camus, this was an indication that movement beyond the negation of the absurd was proving more difficult than he had anticipated.

<sup>15</sup> Edouard Morot-Sir, "Logique de la limite, esthétique de la pauvreté: Théorie de l'essai," in *Albert Camus 1980*, ed. Raymond Gay-Crosier (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1980), 189-207.

go so far as to argue that Camus's interlocutor in this text and others is *Augustine*, or at least Camus's understanding of 'Augustinism,' which in his 1936 dissertation "Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme" he took as exemplary of Christianity (*christianisme*).<sup>16</sup> *Le Mythe* concerns the need to become aware of our mortality and is thus simultaneously a deconstruction of the Judeo-Christian postulate of eternity. Otherwise said, it is the juxtaposition of two myths, those of the Christian and the pagan or of a dramatic as opposed to tragic reading of reality. I will return to this issue of intertextuality later in the chapter during a discussion of some works Camus wrote prior to *Le Mythe*.

Of interest here is why this essay has tended to be studied alone such that Camus is often identified as an 'absurdist philosopher,' a nomenclature to which he objected. In fact, he denies the very possibility of such a philosophical position. For example, in his review of Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*, published in *Alger républicain* on October 20, 1938, Camus writes that

[t]he realization that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning. This is a truth nearly all great minds have taken as their starting point. It is not this discovery that is interesting, but the consequences and rules for action that can be drawn from it.<sup>17</sup>

Arguably, the misidentification of Camus largely results from a non-contextual reading of his works which, oddly enough, *Le Mythe* seems to support. The experience of the

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph McBride makes this assertion in his essay on Camus's dissertation on p. 187 of his text, *Albert Camus: Philosopher and Litterateur*. So too does Paul Archambault, who also asserts that Camus's "first impressions, however superficial, even occasionally erroneous, were never to be corrected, modified, or renewed." See his text, *Camus' Hellenic Sources* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 151. This latter text is hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Hellenic Sources.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Camus, "La Nausée by Jean-Paul Sartre," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 199-202. This quote is found on pp. 201-2.



absurd is fundamentally the experience of a loss of context, that is, a loss of familiarity with or embeddedness within the world. It is at this point that the meaning of existence is no longer able to be assumed tacitly or otherwise said, to be taken for granted. What is immediately given withdraws. That a discussion about such a loss of context may well be reflected in the form of the text would not be unintentional, then. It should be noted here that even in *Le Mythe*, Camus considers himself an artist first (see the 1955 Preface to *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*.) As a good disciple of Nietzsche, for whom there is no separation of form and content, and as a consummate artist, I do not see this marriage of form and content as at all accidental. Indeed, in an interview Camus states that “I cannot imagine literature without style.... I know of only one revolution in art; it belongs to all ages, and consists of the exact adjustment of form to subject matter, of language to theme” (LCE 348).

The desire to identify Camus’s ‘position’ or ‘philosophy’ also results from our need to keep the intellectual field tidy. Those who do not fit neatly into a category are thus generally forced into one. Or as Cruickshank neatly states it, “[r]eaders and critics alike are often quick to find some label by means of which they can characterize or summarize an original writer and thereby render him less disturbing” (42). Perhaps I should now say why I still chose to begin with *Le Mythe* in spite of this discussion of its reception.

Camus not only disavows the identity of an absurdist philosopher. He argues against the identification with any philosophical position at all. As a thinker he refuses systematization, stating that “I am not a philosopher, because I don’t believe in reason

enough to believe in a system. What interests me is knowing how we must behave, and more precisely, how to behave when one does not believe in God or reason.”<sup>18</sup> This concern with the practical informs all his writing, none more markedly than *Le Mythe*, however. This is one of the reasons I have decided to begin with this essay.

This practical concern is as well linked to an existential exigency. Camus wrote *Le Mythe* in France during the Second World War. By then it had become clear to all that the absolutes of both Christianity and Modernity, the promise of God and eternity and the certainties of Reason and History, respectively, had failed and the universe had revealed itself as largely indifferent to man’s strivings. *Le Mythe* thus establishes itself as a natural starting point inasmuch as one is forced to start again when all the structures have crumbled. I will now briefly outline the basic argument of *Le Mythe* and then consider certain intertextual issues.

### *Part I: On the Absurd*

In the first part of this chapter, I will summarize what I understand to be the most salient points of the argument in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. In the second part, I will treat this text in conjunction with the essays which preceded it in the interest of developing an intertextual understanding of it. First I will make a few general comments about *Le Mythe* in order to frame the bare bones of Camus’s position.

The argument, seemingly quite simple, is in fact rather dense. As noted above, Camus was self-avowedly not a philosopher. Yet he, like many philosophers, redefines concepts central to the tradition, such as metaphysic and reason, both of which will be

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<sup>18</sup> Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 2000), 408. Hereafter cited as Todd in the body of the paper.

considered in turn. He also invokes the tradition which in part constitutes the intertextuality of his work considered as a whole, while simultaneously undermining it. For example, Camus uses Cartesian doubt as a method in aid of discovering what can be known with certainty. It should be recalled that through the use of this method, Descartes arrives at both the ‘*cogito*,’ a ‘thinking substance’ he cannot doubt, and at ‘clear and distinct ideas,’ that is, at some indubitable rational principles. Camus as well arrives at a few certainties – the beating of his heart, this hand on his shoulder and the wind on his face; and at least at the mathematical certainty that he, this beating heart, will die, about which he says, “one will never be sufficiently surprised that everyone lives as if no one ‘knew’” (21). Further, Camus, like Descartes, is left with doubts. Descartes’s doubts concern the reality of ‘extended substance,’ his ‘body’ and ‘the world,’ both of which are somehow ‘outside’ of him. Camus comes to disavow the possibility of clear and distinct ideas as regards the world, about whose existence however he is not at all in doubt. Positively stated, he notes three certainties – “my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational or reasonable principle – I also know that I cannot reconcile them” (51). Using the same method as Descartes, Camus arrives at the ‘truths of the body,’ not those of ‘the mind’ considered ‘in itself.’

Also with Descartes, Camus finds it unnecessary to

survey each opinion one after the other, a task of endless proportion. Rather – because undermining the foundations will cause whatever has been built upon them to fall down of its own accord – I [says Descartes] will at once attack those principles which supported everything that I once believed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in *Classics of Western Philosophy*. Ed. S.M. Cahn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), 308.

Again, the principle that Camus attacks in *Le Mythe* is the Judeo-Christian postulate of eternity. According to the logic developed in this text, it is this concept which supports the rest of the Western Judeo-Christian cultural structure or ‘construct’ as Camus refers to it (24).

It is in relation to this principle, and with Pascal, that Camus speaks of both ‘*divertissement*’ and the ‘wager.’ Here again, the tradition is simultaneously invoked and undermined (15). Camus, largely in agreement with Pascal’s notion of *divertissement*, cites the latter’s assertion that “since men cannot provide a cure for death... they have taken it upon themselves not to think of it at all” (Dis 152). For Pascal, then, “the whole task of Christianity is to combat this idleness of heart” (Dis 152). And it is in reference to death that Pascal’s wager needs to be recalled. He wagers on eternity as, on his calculation of the risks, one loses nothing if there is, after all, mere extinction. But one wins everything if indeed there is eternity – one wins ‘eternal life.’ The wager is then a win-win according to Pascal. On Camus’s reading of the Judeo-Christian postulate of eternity, Christianity is, or at least becomes a myth that serves to “relieve me of the weight of my own life ... [which] I must carry ... alone” (54). This very “hope of another life one must ‘deserve’ or the trickery of those who live, not for life itself, but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning” (15) is a betrayal of life. On Camus’s understanding, hope for an eternal life is itself a form of *divertissement*, perhaps the most insidious. He refers to hope as ‘the fatal evasion’ and thus as part of a “fatal game that leads from light in the face of experience to flight from light” (12). Instead,

Camus ‘wagers on the flesh’ knowing full well he will lose, having arrived at least at the mathematical certainty that he will die.

The heart of *Le Mythe* concerns the need to become aware of our mortality, from which Camus draws the logical consequences. Also at the heart of the text, then, is a deconstruction of the Christian metaphysics, the key principle of which is eternity. Otherwise said, it is the juxtaposition of the Christian and pagan myths. The latter concerns a tragic vision of reality which ‘admits of all there is in the universe without refusing the reality of any of it.’ On this view, that I will die is not a provisional truth but final, allowing that I admit only what I can know with certainty. The logic or reason Camus develops in *Le Mythe* is one which ceaselessly demands that we return to what he refers to as the ‘human scale’. Like Kant, Camus is outlining the limits of human reason. Unlike Kant, he does not begin with the Cartesian *cogito*, a thinking substance, but rather with the truths of the body. He begins from the everyday awareness of our living reality or with common sense, not with an idea or theory about it, that is, with a construct. While Camus speaks of appearances, he does not posit noumena which somehow lie behind or under them. What appears is what is. In short, his logic or reason is rooted in empirical reality, the reality of flesh and blood. With this general frame in place, I can now begin to outline the argument of *Le Mythe*.

### *The absurd*

In the original preface to *Le Mythe*, Camus states that

the absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a starting point. In this sense it may be said that there is something provisional in my commentary: one cannot prejudge the position it entails. There will be found here merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady. No metaphysic, no

belief is involved in it for a moment. These are the limits and the only bias of this book. Certain personal experiences urge me to make this clear. (10)

Amongst other assertions to be considered, the first is that Camus here disavows a metaphysic. Yet later in the text he speaks of the ‘universe’ in terms of “a metaphysic and an attitude of mind” (17, 28). A metaphysic, or universe, entails a certain ‘climate’, that is, each universe has its own emotional register or tone. He states that “great feelings take with them their own universe, splendid or abject” (17). As such, one can speak “of a universe of jealousy, of ambition, of selfishness or of generosity” (17). He also refers to a particular metaphysic as a ‘spiritual landscape’. Thus, a metaphysic is, in the first instance, how we feel ourselves in reality. It concerns our living reality. Otherwise said, by metaphysic Camus intends a sensibility, not a system or construct. While one may develop a metaphysics, a speculative frame, this is not its ordinary meaning. Rather, it is derived from our living reality, that is, from living experience. As such, ‘no belief is involved’ as is required by a metaphysics understood as system or construct. In light of this, Camus asserts of his method that “solely appearances can be enumerated and the climate made itself felt” (18).

Again, Camus’s interests tend to be practical, nowhere more so than in *Le Mythe*.

This proclivity is made abundantly clear in the claim with which Camus opens this essay:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.... If I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that, I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. (11)

Questions of worth are questions of meaning. If I ascribe a value to something, I am saying that it is meaningful, at the very least to me. The question whether life is worth

living is in fact a question concerning meaning. Does life have a meaning? Camus considers this question in light of the experience of the absurd, an experience which can endure for less than the length of a moment or for years, and which may occur once or recur with a radically disruptive frequency. The world ‘withdraws’ in this experience. What was once familiar enough to be taken for granted – one’s routine, one’s lover, oneself – is suddenly strange. Then the question of meaning arises. What is it all about? According to Camus,

[a] world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (13)

The suicide has, says Camus, at least instinctively recognized “the ridiculous character of ...habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering” (13). Central to *Le Mythe* is the question about the reasonability of suicide, be it physical or intellectual annihilation, as a response to the absurd. Given the absolute nature of this possible response to the absurd, Camus judges it the most important of questions.

Camus was twenty-eight in 1941, the year during which he completed *Le Mythe*. At the age of seventeen, he had his first attack of tuberculosis which foreclosed on a career in the university. It was a first and formative glimpse of the restrictions illness imposes and of his mortality.<sup>20</sup> While a young man this question was, of necessity, posed personally, quite devoid of romantic notions. I suggest that *Le Mythe* is clearly not an

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<sup>20</sup> Morvan Lebesque, *Portrait of Camus: An Illustrated Biography*, trans. T.C. Sharman (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 17-19. According to Lebesque, a medical test was required in order to qualify to take the examination for the degree in philosophy. Camus failed the medical exam twice.

academic or rhetorical exercise. Indeed, in *L'Homme révolté* he is extremely critical of Romanticism which he considers a rather adolescent flirtation with suicide and death. It is in light of this that his reference to suicide and Schopenhauer early in *Le Mythe* need be read. He says that “Schopenhauer is often cited, as a fit subject for laughter, because he praised suicide while seated at a well-set table. This is no subject for joking. That way of not taking the tragic seriously is not so grievous, but it helps to judge a man” (15).

In the 1955 preface to the second edition of *Le Mythe*, Camus states:

Written fifteen years ago, in 1940, amidst the French and European disaster, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism. In all the books I have written since, I have attempted to pursue this direction. Although *The Myth of Sisyphus* poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert. (7)

I have quoted this passage at length for two reasons. First, as he argues in *Le Mythe*, there is no remedy for the absurd sensibility. There is only learning ‘to live and to create in the very midst of the desert.’ Regardless of one’s aptitude, then, the sensibility of the absurd is rather like a virus that may lay dormant indefinitely, but will always exist as a possibility of disruption. If the gap or divorce resulting from this experience is occluded willfully, as it is in the creation of a construct, it will persist. If it is ignored, if one slips back into the comfort of the daily routine, the complacency of the everyday, it most surely persists. In *Le Mythe*, Camus combats all efforts to elude the truths this sensibility gives rise to through maintaining consciousness of them. There is only this constant effort of the will to remain conscious in the face of what one takes to be true, however unpleasant. And frankly, *Le Mythe* fails. A rule of behavior, that is, a code of conduct or an ethics ultimately cannot be derived from an absurd reasoning, which is Camus’s stated



aim. He does not ‘proceed beyond nihilism’ in *Le Mythe*. As he admits in the 1955 preface, he continues to ‘pursue this direction’ in all that he writes.

However – and this is the second reason for quoting this passage at length – in spite of this failure, or perhaps because of it, this text strangely succeeds. It lays bare the antinomies of the human condition with an unremitting starkness (41). We are alive and have a passion to live. We will die. We have a desire to understand the world, to unify our experience. We meet the resistance of the world to our strivings. We have a need to feel a familiarity with or a belonging to the world. We are denied this by the inhumanness of the world. He writes at a point that “if man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled” (23). Camus sinks into these bitter first truths of the body and surveys the desert from this vantage point. In the consequences he draws from this examination, and in his presentation of possible responses to the human condition, he does indeed extend ‘a lucid invitation to live.’ To read this text in isolation, then, is to foreclose upon this invitation. But in what does it consist?

*An absurd reasoning*

Camus begins *Le Mythe* with a first description of an ‘absurd reasoning’ against the ‘classical dialectic,’ thereby beginning to delineate an alternative way of seeing and experiencing reality. That he needs to find an alternative logic or reason is dictated by the nature of the question he is addressing. What is needed is a reason that establishes a

balance between evidence and lyricism, [that allows] us to achieve simultaneously emotion and lucidity. In a subject at once so humble and so heavy with emotion, the learned and classical dialectic must yield, one can see, to a more modest attitude of mind deriving at one and the same time from common sense and understanding. (12)

In order to begin to outline what he means by an absurd reasoning, it is useful to very briefly note the salient characteristics of classical dialectical reasoning. The marks of an absurd reasoning will thereby begin to come into view.

The goal of classical dialectical reasoning is explanation. That is, the ‘classic procedure of reason’ is “unifying or making familiar under the guise of a great principle” (44). Undergirded by the principle of non-contradiction, it cannot admit of antinomies be they epistemological or existential. Dialectic or syllogistic reasoning thus subsumes or suppresses one term of an argument to the other or both in the interest of a higher unity. This type of reasoning thereby tends to be totalizing in nature. The singular is subsumed to the general, or better, is abstracted from. Indeed, it is only through this initial abstraction from the prolixity of existence that unity is reached. As such, through this reasoning we arrive at best at the illusion of unity, that is, at a totalizing logic.

Camus also requires an alternate logic given the historical context. As noted earlier, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century faith in absolutes had collapsed. In light of this he notes that “with the exception of professional rationalists, today people despair of true knowledge” (24). The sensibility of the absurd had become the general climate. Indeed, the classical dialectic had by then succumbed to instrumental reason which holds that what is true is what works. Otherwise said, it had succumbed to power. In order to confront the nihilist tendencies resulting from the death of the absolutes, instrumental reason being one of them, Camus surveys contemporary thinkers who, like him, address the absurd sensibility.

Prior to this survey, he makes only a ‘rapid classification’ of various experiences of the absurd because “they run through all literatures and all philosophies. Everyday conversation feeds on them.... But is it essential to be sure of these facts in order to be able to question oneself subsequently on the primordial question” (21-21). He briefly describes possible experiences of the absurd on three planes, those of the emotional, intellectual and historical. On the plane of emotion he considers this experience in different areas of life as, for example, in our relationship with nature which suddenly appears in all its ‘primitive hostility’ as opposed to the backdrop we normally take it to be; and in relation to others and the self which, at times, is an experience of ‘man’s own inhumanity,’ as for instance when we find ourselves asking, without any emotion whatsoever, why some stranger we see is alive; or the moment we look at a loved one and suddenly see a stranger; or when we look in a mirror or at a photograph of ourselves and there is that instant of non-recognition. In each of these experiences, the ties that bind are suddenly loosed. Finally, he considers it in terms of our relationship to time, as for example, the morning we wake up and realize we are ‘suddenly’ thirty, thereby ‘situating ourselves in relation to time’ (20). Then there is that moment when we become aware of at least the mathematical certainty that we will die. Of the experience of our mortality, he speaks of the ‘horror which seizes us,’ referring to it as ‘the revolt of the flesh.’

On the plane of the mind Camus begins by pointing out the contradiction inherent to all thought, the “first step [of which] is to distinguish what is true from what is false” (22). He refers to Aristotle’s demonstration of the paradox which results from asserting that all one’s opinions are true, which entails the assertion of the contrary and thus of

one's thesis as well. The desire of all thought is to render the world familiar, which Camus refers to as our "nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute" (23). However, while the scientist, for example, may be able to enumerate all the laws of physics, this does not lead to an 'apprehension of the world.' The fact of the world itself escapes our theories. In brief, Camus concludes that our only certainty is "[t]his world I can touch, and [which] I likewise judge... exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction" (24). The question is whether one can live in such a desert.

On the historical plane, and with Camus, existentialists, religious thinkers and phenomenologists, "[f]rom Jaspers to Heidegger, from Kierkegaard to Chestov, from the phenomenologists to Scheler..., [have] all started out from that indescribable universe where contradiction, antinomy, anguish or impotence reigns" (27-28). Each of these thinkers begins from 'humiliated reason' in his respective recognition of the sheer prolixity of existence and of our inability to explain it, that is, to unify it. We are thus returned to the original chaos or desert when we come "face to face with the irrational" (31), while simultaneously feeling within ourselves a "longing for happiness and for reason" (31). In considering the intellectual responses to this condition, Camus makes note of the distinction between the 'feeling and the notion of the absurd' (32). From the late-19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, thinkers began from the common experience of the absurd, that is, they shared a 'spiritual landscape' or 'common climate.' Of interest to Camus is "the discovery of what their conclusions have in common" (32).

Of the two existentialists Camus lists, he says of Heidegger that while he recognizes the human condition and remains with it, "[t]his professor of philosophy

writes without trembling and in the most abstract language in the world” (28). I suggest that this approach to the primordial question of death is itself a type of abstraction or at the very least a form of defence. One can lay down one’s pen at the end of the day and neatly close the book on it. Alternatively, for Jaspers, whom Camus calls ‘that apostle of humiliated thought,’ our lack of understanding in the face of the irrationality of the world leads to the assertion of a transcendent reality which assures unity where none can be experienced (36). According to Camus, thereby “the absurd becomes god (in the broadest sense of this word) and that inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates everything. Nothing logically prepares this reasoning” (36). Thus, Camus refers to it as a ‘leap.’ This reasoning is, in fact, a function of hope in the face of death and disorder.

The religious thinkers make a similar leap in the face of the absurd, the crux of which is to ‘transform the notion into eternity’s springboard’ (38). It is at this moment that the notion of the absurd

ceases to be linked to human lucidity. [It] is no longer that evidence that man ascertains without consenting to it. The struggle is eluded. Man integrates the absurd and in that condition causes to disappear its essential character which is opposition, laceration and divorce. This leap is an escape. (38)

Here the nostalgia for the absolute overcomes that to which the experience of the absurd gives rise, which is both the recognition of the irrational character of the world and of our need to understand it, which is just this nostalgia for unity or for the absolute. As noted earlier, the absurd arises between the world and oneself. It consists in this ‘equilibrium.’ Eliminate one of the terms of the relation and the absurd is ‘conjured away.’ The limits of reason and lucid thought are thereby overstepped, and as such the religious and secular

existentialists, with the exception of Heidegger, make “of the absurd the criterion of the other world, whereas it is simply a residue of the experience of this world” (40).

In overstepping the limits of reason one also eludes what the experience of the absurd evidences – that of a limited and closed universe voided of hope. Again, the question is whether one is able to live in such a desert. Conversely, respecting “the relationship that constitutes properly speaking the feeling of absurdity” (40), the absurd man

recognizes the struggle, does not absolutely scorn reason and admits the irrational. Thus he again embraces in a single glance all the data of experience and he is little inclined to leap before knowing. He knows simply that in that alert awareness there is no further place for hope. (39)

This is the absurd man’s ‘cry of revolt’ against the human condition as opposed to the ‘frantic adherence’ to our nostalgia which leads us to “deify the only certainty... [we] henceforth... [possess], the irrational” (40). What is refused in making the leap is the ‘antinomy of the human condition.’ What the heart knows is thereby refused by the intellect. It is, in effect, ‘the sacrifice of the intellect, the one in which God most rejoices’ according to Ignatius Loyola (40). Thus the ‘existential attitude is philosophical suicide.’ Again, the absurd man recognizes both his need to understand and the universe which is ‘indifferent to his strivings.’ In so doing, he maintains both terms of the relationship while simultaneously revolting. Camus asserts that Kierkegaard ‘shows us the path taken’ “to stifle the underlying demands of the human heart” (41). The ‘mutilation’ of the relationship which constitutes the feeling of absurdity is met by “an almost intentional mutilation of the soul” (41). To support this contention, Camus cites two passages from Kierkegaard’s *Journal*:

‘What I lacked was the animal which *also* belongs to human destiny... But give me a body then.’ And further on: ‘Oh! especially in my early youth what should I not have given to be a man, even for six months... what I lack basically, is a body and the physical conditions of existence.’ (41)

This ‘mutilation of the soul’ consists in the negation of the man of flesh and blood, that is, of ‘sentient tissue’ or flesh.<sup>21</sup> The whole man is the sensing, feeling, thinking body, not ‘soul and body’ or ‘embodied soul.’

These latter two locutions imply an originary divide. This divide is instated in the name of ‘hope,’ as is evidenced in Kierkegaard’s claim that “for the Christian death is certainly not the end of everything and it implies infinitely more hope than life implies for us, even when that life is overflowing with health and vigour” (41). Camus does not outright deny the ‘religious attitude’ toward life, as denying what it affirms implicitly asserts it (42). Thus, “it is not the affirmation of God that is questioned here, but rather the logic leading to the affirmation” (43). He merely claims that “[t]here is no logical certainty here. There is no experimental probability either. All I can say is that, in fact, that transcends my [human] scale” (42). In effect, “god is maintained only through the negation of human reason” (43), while simultaneously ‘laying claim to the eternal’ (43). It is in this that the leap consists in the existential attitude, be it secular or religious.

Rather than negating human reason, the phenomenology of intention as laid out by Husserl ultimately abandons the limits of reason and thereby restores it to ‘eternal Reason.’ Husserl begins ‘from the things themselves,’ that is, with the thing as it appears to consciousness and thus in the first instance he ‘describes’ rather than ‘explains’ the

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<sup>21</sup> I am borrowing this coinage of ‘sentient tissue’ from Elaine Scarry’s text, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). See, for example, p. 123, where she refers to the ‘sentience of tissue.’ In light of Camus’s language, however, I prefer the notion of ‘sentient flesh.’

prolixity of the world. However, through the eidetic reduction he discloses the ‘unvarying essences of the things themselves,’ asserting that they would be what they are whether the things themselves existed or not. He applies the same reasoning to the mind, claiming that “if we could contemplate clearly the exact laws of psychic processes, they would be seen to be ... eternal and invariable, like the laws of theoretical natural science. Hence they would be valid even if there were no psychic processes” (MS 47). Camus claims that Husserl thereby makes the leap from a ‘psychological truth,’ that is, from ‘the integrating power of human reason’ to ‘eternal Reason,’ which denies the former in restoring it to the latter. In fact, Husserl remains a good student of Kant.

After examining the conclusions which the ‘abstract philosophers’ and the ‘religious philosophers’ draw from the experience of the absurd, Camus concludes that both approaches “lead to the same preaching” (48). Starting “out from the same disorder [they] support each other in the same anxiety. Nostalgia [for the absolute and unity] is stronger here than knowledge” (48). This desire for unity, which undergirds both our nostalgia for it and the classical dialectic, lies at the heart of what Camus takes as the antinomy of the human condition – our desire for familiarity met by the prolixity of existence. Just as classical reason sacrifices one term of our condition, the singular, to this desire for unity, so contemporary thinkers make sacrifices in the service of this nostalgia. The deification of the irrationality of the world by the ‘irrationalists’ negates the value of finite human reason altogether; and the ‘rationalists,’ in abandoning the limits of human reason, once again sacrifice the singular in their attempt to ‘gather together the universe.’ In short, both groups of thinkers sacrifice the antinomy of the



human condition insofar as “the final leap restores in [them] the eternal and its comforts” (50). In opposition to what he refers to respectively as ‘humiliated’ and ‘triumphal’ reason (48), Camus outlines an absurd reasoning which “wants to be faithful to the evidence that aroused it. That evidence is the absurd” (50). Unlike the irrationalists and rationalists, Camus refuses intellectual suicide in order to determine “whether one can live with [an absurd reasoning] or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it” (50).

*A provisional conclusion: On an absurd passion*

At a point in *Le Mythe*, Camus speaks of his desire to “liberate my universe of its phantoms and to people it solely with flesh and blood truths whose presence I cannot deny.” (93) This requires that we accept “a life *without appeal*” (93). The first truth of an absurd reasoning is that we are born in this world and that we will die in this world. And the first step is the recognition of this truth. Camus acknowledges, however, that “there is so much stubborn hope in the human heart. The most destitute men often end up by accepting illusion” (94). This persistence of hope ‘shows the difficulty of the absurd *ascēsis*,’ thereby confirming the need for a constant alertness and vigilance (103). As noted in the prologue, this discipline of consciousness is best understood in terms of what Pierre Hadot refers to as an ‘*askēsis* of desire’ (117). In its broadest sense, *askēsis* means exercise. Again, this requires a recognition of and respect for our natural and necessary needs, those of the body (117). Otherwise said, it necessitates the awareness of the limits of the body which entail the limits of reason (110). On Camus’s view, an *askēsis* of desire concerns the acceptance of the first truth, which results from his concern with this

world. In light of this, he asks if the absurd reasoning is a logic unto death, that is, if it gives a reason for annihilation.

The logic of the absurd, however, implies revolt. If the absurd is to be acknowledged, it cannot be overstepped as this is equally the annihilation of the absurd and of the self, be it intellectually or physically. Otherwise said, it is the refusal of reality. It is only a question of the speed with which one refuses. One can do it quickly or one can refuse for the length of a life by foreclosing on it, either by going through the motions, sinking back into the ‘everyday,’ or by living in and through a construct. Otherwise said, one can choose physical annihilation, oblivion or consolation, each alternative being an ‘insult to existence’ (MS 16). Or one can admit one’s passion to live in the face of the metaphysical death sentence and choose the way of revolt.

It is consciousness itself which ‘sets us in opposition to all creation’ (51) and it is through sustaining this awareness of the ‘break between us and the world’ that we are brought back to ourselves from the ‘impersonal pronoun one.’ When undergoing the experience of the absurd, all the structures of meaning which had heretofore held us are henceforth disrupted. Rather than ‘rebuild the mansions of thought,’ Camus proposes to “take up the heartrending and marvellous wager of the absurd” (52). This wager consists in living with what the experience of the absurd evidences – that of a closed universe in which we are born and in which we will die. Rather than taking a leap, it is living with what I can know with certainty here and now, as ‘the rest is subterfuge.’ Thus the wager consists in living “simultaneously with the awareness and rejection of death” (54), that is, it is simultaneously an acceptance and refusal of the metaphysical death sentence under

which we live. As such, the absurd wager is a form of metaphysical revolt, and it is this “revolt [that] gives life its value” (54). For the absurd man, “the absurd is his extreme tension which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth which is defiance” (55).

Camus’s fidelity to the creation and to the flesh is maintained by an absurd *askēsis* which is, in effect, a crucifixion – it is being nailed to this world without consideration of what may lie behind or beyond it. Such considerations in his view are intellectual diversions. However, the way of the absurd is not a confession which somehow implicates the reader as one who is either sympathetic or antagonistic, otherwise said, either for or against. While Camus lucidly presents his views, he remains respectful of alternate visions. For instance, in an article published in the *Alger républicain* on November 11, 1938, Camus refers in passing to immortality as belonging to the class of ‘futile problems’, that is, as “an affair each man must settle for himself and on which others should not pass judgment.”<sup>22</sup> As opposed to a confession, *Le Mythe* is Camus’s profession. He lays bare how he experiences and sees reality and asks us to consider this alternate logic. At a point he refers to the way of the absurd as a ‘dirty adventure’ and allows that it is not for everyone. Rather, it is a peculiar ‘vocation.’ Again, it does not require that all assent to this way. For whom does he write then? He offers it as a way of seeing ‘for those who live outside of grace,’ that is, for those for who

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<sup>22</sup> Albert Camus, *Youthful Writings in The First Camus*, ed. Paul Viallaneix and trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1976), 3. [*Cahiers Albert Camus II: Le Premier Camus*, Paris: Gallimard, 1973.]

have ‘forgotten how to cope’ and who remain without comfort (52). He writes, more precisely, “the meaning of my works: so many men are deprived of mercy. How to live without mercy? One must try and do what Christianity never did: to take care of the damned” (Todd 214).

While reading *Le Mythe*, from time to time one can sense the anguish that such an *askēsis* causes Camus. Indeed, he claims that an absurd reasoning “establishes its limits since it is powerless to calm its anguish” (49). The very caution with which he draws the limits of an absurd reasoning suggests that Camus is not arguing the absurd as a conclusion, but as a starting point. He quite carefully determines the limits in an effort to avoid absolutes, not in an effort to establish the absolute irrationality of the universe. As Camus notes, for the absurd mind, “the world is neither so rational nor so irrational. It is unreasonable and only that” (49). Any position other than a sceptical metaphysics would violate this philosophy of limits. For example, while Camus is often referred to as an atheist, to be self-consistent the most he can assert, and generally does assert, is agnosticism. While an absurd logic disallows appeals to a higher principle, which we can call God, it need not, nor can it establish the non-existence of God. Again, as he notes in reference to the irrationalists for whom the absurd is taken as proof of another reality, “it is not the affirmation of God that is questioned here, but rather the logic leading to the affirmation” (43). Indeed, Camus admits that

I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand. (51)

These are the claims of the absurd man, “he who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning” (64).

In *Le Mythe*, Camus drives Western logic, which is dominated by the principle of non-contradiction, to its limit. That is, the principle of non-contradiction is not understood by Camus, as by the tradition, solely as an intellectual principle or logic governing how the mind conceives of reality, but rather as expressive of an existential exigency. In light of this, he notes that

[w]hatever may be the plays on words and the acrobatics of logic, to understand is above all to unify. The mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feelings in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity. Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal. (22)

On Camus’s reading of this principle, our deepest intellectual desire is parallel to our unconscious feelings. Unlike a principle that is understood primarily intellectually, even when applied to the world (for example, that something cannot exist and not exist simultaneously), there is no possible reconciliation or resolution of the antinomy of the human condition. I have a passion to live. I know I will die. Again, Camus does not deny the reality of absolutes, God or immortality. He simply holds that these notions are beyond the ‘human scale.’ He is developing a type of logic and following it to its end as opposed to offering a belief or a metaphysics. In service of this, Camus delimits the principle of non-contradiction and drives it to its limit. He remains with the existential antinomy of the human condition, which is evidenced by the experience of the absurd, as opposed to resolving it dialectically as in the classical tradition or in terms of the leap of

the irrationalists or rationalists. However differently, both the classical dialectic and ‘the leap’ abandon one term of the relation and thereby restore to the thinker ‘the eternal and its comfort’ (50). Camus instead lets the contradiction stand, as “his reasoning wants to be faithful to the evidence that aroused it” (50). He pauses in the ‘instant that precedes the leap’ in his attempt ‘to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism.’ And in reaching the limit of the dominant logic of the West, he arrives at its origin. The first step, then, is driving this dominant logic back to its existential origin, as in living reality there is no overcoming of the antinomy of the human condition. There are flesh and blood truths. The rest is subterfuge (50).

The essay is an object lesson in the absurd, strictly speaking. Camus does not offer the reader a ‘philosophy of the absurd,’ that is, an explanation of the absurd or a metaphysical system which takes up the experience and frames it. Rather, the text is a description of and a manual for living with the absurd. As he states in the original preface to *Le Mythe*, he offers neither a belief nor a metaphysic. He writes “merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady” (10) for which he sees no remedy or cure. It is in light of this that the most important philosophical question, according to Camus, is whether life is worth living or not.

This text is marked almost by bravado at times, which I believe is born out of the anguish such a vision of existence caused Camus and the courage he required to sustain it. However, I believe that the consequences of a philosophy of consolation, be it of the irrationalists or the rationalists, worried Camus more than did the real anguish evinced in him by the awareness of mortality. Camus claims to seek only one thing – the truth. And

as he says, “seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable” (43). With Camus, we risk absolute ruin if we refuse reality. Our first truth concerns our mortality. In relation to this first truth, Camus speaks of the curse of the mind, that of hope. It is here that the first lie is born, the first delusion – that I am not my body. I am ‘spirit.’ I am ‘spirit incarnate.’ I am not this fragility, this vulnerability. Otherwise said, the first lie is the ‘mutilation of the soul.’ This is the first and most dangerous lie possible. If one becomes aware of the gap such an attitude toward ‘the body’ creates, the return is increasingly difficult as the body will carry memories which were not assumed at the time. The rage which marks the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a testimony to this, I suggest. On the view of an absurd reasoning, the only possible value life has is this very impermanency, this vulnerability of the singular. The body, you, I and the creation, are fragile. With Lazere, the singular on this view is “absolutely insignificant and absolutely irreplaceable” (Bloom 68). And the value of the singular is final. If there is an afterlife, a continuance, what value has it here and now?

Speaking of the artist at a point, Camus asserts that an absurd reason or intelligence refuses “to reason the concrete. It marks the triumph of the carnal.... It will not yield to the temptation of adding to what it described a deeper meaning that it knows to be illegitimate” (89). This refusal equally applies to the thinker. Description is not explanation. The former allows the prolixity of existence to reappear. There are only appearances. There is nothing hidden behind or beyond them which thereby ‘grounds’ them, that is, which explains, unifies and justifies them. Rather, reality is experienced as radical dispersion. It is, then, ‘a rebirth of the world’ in which all things are privileged. An equivalency is thereby instated, which is ‘non-hierarchical and non-valuative.’

Again, it is in defiance of the absurdity of the human condition that the absurd man refuses both physical and intellectual suicide. Once the primordial question has been answered, the next question is ‘how are we to behave?’ That is, once one has become aware of the absurd and agreed to live in defiance of it, one must try to ‘deduce a rule of behavior from it.’ What is the ground or justification of a choice of action in an absurd world which is marked by a loss of transcendence? Can one live without appeal, that is, can one live without a transcendent or immanent justification? Given the equivalency that is inaugurated by an absurd reasoning, all actions are equally indifferent. Hence ‘evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice.’ Without a transcendent principle, be it God, Reason or History, our moral choices appear to be without justification. On this view, there remains only human responsibility without metaphysical aid, supernatural authority or inherited values (Cruickshank 10). However, with no higher values to guide behavior, ‘efficiency becomes the immediate aim.’ Camus later notes in *L’Homme révolté* that “if we claim to adopt the absurdist attitude, we must prepare ourselves to commit murder, thus admitting that logic is more important than scruples that we consider illusory.”<sup>23</sup> When driven to its limits, an absurd logic, which begins in an impasse, ends in an impasse as well. An absurd reasoning that refuses self-annihilation, be it intellectual or physical, cannot argue against murder, as all actions are equally indifferent. In itself it is ultimately inseparable from nihilism, then, which is an “impoverished logic in whose eyes everything is equal” (R 7). Thus *Le Mythe* does not proceed beyond nihilism, its stated aim. In his notebook Camus notes at a point that “I see clearly that absurd thought

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<sup>23</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 5-6. Subsequent references to this text will be cited in the body of the paper as R. [*L’Homme révolté*. Paris: Gallimard, 1951.]



(even in aesthetics) ends in an impasse, and the problem is, Can one live in an impasse?”  
(Todd 167)

Rather than subsuming or abstracting from the singular, an absurd reasoning begins and ends with it. However, while the value of the singular is thereby respected, it does not provide a rule by which we can live. Thus the singular is endangered by the very logic with which Camus hopes to preserve it. The question which needs to be addressed is how the impasse of the absurd was reached by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Without returning to the origins of a malady, any attempt to ameliorate or overcome the symptoms merely masks them. As such, I will begin with the Camus of the early lyrical essays, that is, with the first man. In subsequent chapters, the trajectory he follows will be traced until we arrive at the last man in the final chapter.

*Part II: On the intertextual context – A first approach*

*The early lyrical essays and the marks of the absurd*

Camus’s early lyrical essays form part of the intertextual context within which *Le Mythe* needs to be read, as both sets of early lyrical essays, *L’Envers et l’endroit* (1937) and *Noces* (1938),<sup>24</sup> acknowledge all the marks of the absurd universe noted in *Le Mythe*. However, they evidence a radically different attitude or metaphysic toward that universe. After highlighting a few important elements in the essays in *L’Envers et l’endroit*, I shall offer a comparative analysis of aspects of *Le Mythe* and *Noces*.

The heart of this first set of essays concerns the recognition and acceptance of life and death, the beauty and horror of existence together. In the last essay of *L’Envers et*

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<sup>24</sup> Both sets of essays are found in their entirety in *Lyrical and Critical Essays: L’Envers et l’endroit (The Wrong Side and the Right Side)*, including the 1958 preface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 3-61; and *Noces (Nuptials)*, pp. 63-105.

*l'endroit*, “The Wrong Side and the Right Side,” Camus states that “I do not want to choose between the right and wrong sides of the world, and I do not like a choice to be made” (61). It is important to note here that by referring to ‘the right and wrong sides’ Camus is not making a value judgment. Rather, this locution intends that life and death are two sides of the same coin or piece of cloth. How is one to choose between them? Indeed, why would one, he seems to ask in these essays.

The first of Camus’s published lyrical essays entitled “Irony,” consists of three apparently unconnected vignettes, each of which involves a youth or youths observing the elderly: an old woman who is ‘left behind with God’ and her loneliness as the youths go to a film; an old man who tells his stories to an increasingly and obviously less interested audience of a few young men; and finally, the reflections of a young man on his lack of reaction, years before, to the death of his dictatorial grandmother. Camus closes this meditation on life and death, or on the impatience of youth to get on with life even in the presence of the elderly’s need to be recognized, with the following observations:

None of this fits together? How very true! A woman you leave behind to go the movies, an old man to whom you have stopped listening, a death that redeems nothing, and then, on the other hand, the whole radiance of the world. *What difference does it make if you accept everything?* Here are three destinies, different and yet alike. Death for us all, but his own death to each. After all, the sun still warms our bones for us. (29; italics mine)

As the title signals, the tone of this essay is ironic, that attitude which allows a recognition of and allowance for even the least acceptable by virtue of the very distance the tone instates. It is not an irony of ridicule, however, but that of a restrained and deeply felt passion. The question he asks here – what difference does it make if you

accept everything? – appears to guide the whole of this text. I also think this question underlies and thus implicitly guides the whole of Camus’s subsequent inquiries as well. It is answered variously in different texts, but resounds throughout his odyssey. This assertion will hopefully be borne out across the body of this paper. Here I merely assert it.

The second essay of interest is entitled “Between Yes and No,” the basic theme of which is the restorative nature of love. It also includes most of the key concepts of *Le Mythe*. For example, with regards to the world, he speaks of the ‘indifference of immortal things’, but unlike in *Le Mythe* this brings with it a peace (31). He also quietly recognizes that doing one’s homework as a child and one’s work as a man ‘lead to nothing but old age’ (34), which contrasts with the more anguished recognition of our daily routine and our mortality in *Le Mythe*. While he speaks of the same daily torments and of sickness, suicide and death in this essay, one of Camus’s more autobiographical, its tone is patient and ruminating. He sits in a café, meandering through his past. He recalls the love he felt for his mother, but recognizes that it was wider than simply love for her. The love he speaks of in this essay is ‘objectless.’ It is the love which arises during that odd quiet hour which he refers to as the “pause between yes and no, [when] I leave hope or disgust with life for another time” (37). Again, while the experiences discussed in *Le Mythe* are present, the anxiety is absent. Indeed, there is a quiet acceptance even while recognizing that hope and disgust will resume. And rather than the resistance which marks the absurd man’s relationship to the world, he speaks here of “the absurd simplicity of the world” (39), claiming that “yes, everything is simple. It’s men who complicate things” (39). He

concludes this essay by noting his need for lucidity and with a caution regarding how we speak of things. There he writes:

Don't let them say about the man condemned to death: "He is going to pay his debt to society," but: "They're going to chop his head off." It may seem like nothing. But it does make a little difference. There are some people who prefer to look their destiny straight in the eye. (39)

While this desire to 'look destiny straight in the eye' lies at the heart of *Le Mythe* as well, the tone changes radically between these works.

*A shadow appears*

What is the shadow that falls between the lyrical essays and Camus's philosophical essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*? The latter text explores the marks of the absurd, all of which were first addressed in the lyrical essays. Whereas in his first approach Camus maintains a balance between love and revolt, between *yes* and *no* to existence understood as tragic, this equilibrium appears to be lost by the time of the second approach. I suggest that *Le Mythe* is marked by a curious absence of love and thus ends as it begins – in nihilism. The question is what, in the second approach to the same set of experiences, throws a shadow such that the light is obscured? What eclipses the *yes* to existence and as such eclipses existence, if indeed it requires both our assent and refusal?

Cruickshank ascribes the difference in tone between *Noces* and *Le Mythe* to the divide of an emotional and analytic intelligence:

*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, then, is the fruit of further reflection and more disciplined thought about the content of *Noces*. It attempts a rational investigation and formulation of an earlier emotional experience. It moves forward from a predominately physical to a predominantly intellectual response to existence. The added thought brings new emphases as well as new problems. In particular, the

contrast between physical exaltation and the certainty of death, which remained a dualism in *Noces*, becomes so intensified in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* as to be one of those insoluble paradoxes giving rise to the sense of the absurd. (43)

Certainly the lyrical essays, both *Noces* and *L'Envers et l'endroit*, express deep emotions about existence and in that sense can be considered an emotional response to it. However, this focus on emotions as a 'predominantly physical' response disregards Camus's dismissal of what he refers to as 'feelings' in his last essay in *Noces*, "The Desert." There he speaks of 'fleeting feelings' as opposed to the 'eternal emotions,' which I take as a distinction between emotions as a physical response and passions which are a shaping force. Camus states that "a man's feelings are nothing. Surely everyone has a heart. But the great simple, eternal emotions around which the love of living revolves – hatred, love, tear, and joys – these grow deep inside a man and mold the visage of his destiny..." (93-94). As opposed to feelings or physical emotions, the passions of the soul, those of hatred, love, tear and joys, are the passions which shape the face of a woman, that is, which form the character of a person. It is the passions which move us, whereas emotions come and go. And Camus's response to existence in both *Noces* and *L'Envers et l'endroit* suggests a shaping force rather than a fleeting relationship.

Moreover, ascribing the deep difference in tone between these early essays and *Le Mythe* to the divide between an emotional or physical and intellectual response to existence imports the body/mind dualism of the Modern tradition to these texts. The lyrical essays are recognized by Cruickshank as being pagan in sensibility. Thus, his attribution of this divide is, I suggest, the projection of a modern sensibility onto a sensibility foreign to it, absolutely in the case of the lyrical essays though perhaps more

problematically in *Le Mythe*. In the lyrical essays, the response to existence is perhaps better understood as aesthetic, that is, as a response which is ‘emotional and intellectual’ together or better, a singular response to beauty and truth together. An aesthetic response is neither emotional nor physical. Rather, in an aesthetic sensibility, beauty and truth are experienced in their original unity, one which the modern dualism of body and mind finally and fully sunders. And our response to beauty and the truths to which it gives rise, as evidenced in the love and lucidity expressed in these early essays, is equally unitary. Thus, just as the experience of the absurd gives rise to an absurd sensibility or metaphysic, so the experience of the beautiful gives rise to an aesthetic sensibility or metaphysic. The difference in tone is perhaps nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the respective descriptions of the absurd and aesthetic experience of nature. This illustration will also serve to begin giving some shape to the shadow.

In an absurd awareness, a gap arises between our deepest desire, which is to feel a familiarity, a belonging to the creation, and the reality which withdraws from us. In *Le Mythe*, Camus says of our experience of nature that

at the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across the millennia. For a second we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood it in solely the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again. That stage-scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is. It withdraws at a distance from us. (20)

In an absurd awareness of the universe, nature withdraws, thereby denying us the sense of familiarity we crave.

In the aesthetic sensibility, conversely, our deepest desire, our need of familiarity or belonging, is experienced even while nature simultaneously denies us. Again, the aesthetic experience of nature is an experience of beauty and truth together. Of his relationship to nature, Camus speaks of being restored to himself. In this movement of self-restoration, the existence which is over and against us also comes into its own. In neither sensibility is nature experienced as that which can be made to fit our needs or as a backdrop for our emotions and thoughts about beauty. Speaking of the Tuscany landscape in the last of the essays in *Noces*, “The Desert,” Camus writes:

It took me out of myself in the deepest sense of the word. It assured me that, except for my love and the wondrous cry of these stones, here is no meaning in anything. The world is beautiful, and outside it there is no salvation. The great truth that it patiently taught me is that the mind is nothing, not even the heart. And that the stone warmed by the sun, or the cypress tree shooting up against the suddenly clear sky, mark the boundary of the only universe in which ‘being right’ is meaningful: nature without men. And this world annihilates me. It carries me through to the end. It denies me without anger. (103)

In both an absurd and aesthetic sensibility, nature is recognized in all its beauty which entails life and death, terror and glory. Otherwise said, in both approaches there is an awareness of the inhumanity at the heart of nature. However, the responses to this are diametrically opposed. In an aesthetic approach, both truths are recognized and accepted and thus give rise to a relationship with nature which is marked by a ‘tender indifference’ as opposed to an angry revolt. In the experience of the absurd a shadow falls such that nature’s denial of us is experienced as absolute. Is this simply a result of an intellectual approach to nature? Or is it a symptom of a deeper malady?

In “Nuptials at Tipasa” Camus speaks of there being one love, which he refers to as ‘glory.’ I will quote extensively here, as this is almost a manifesto-like statement

concerning love, life and death, the thematic of the lyrical essays and equally the marks of the absurd:

Here I understand what is meant by glory: the right to love without limits. There is only one love in this world. To clasp a woman's body is also to hold in one's arms this strange joy that descends from sky to sea. In a moment, when I throw myself down among the absinthe plants to bring their scent into my body, I shall know appearances to the contrary, that I am fulfilling a truth which is the sun's and which will also be my death's. In a sense, it is indeed my life that I am staking here, a life that tastes of warm stone, that is full of the sighs of the sea and the rising song of the crickets. The breeze is cool and the sky blue. I love this life with abandon and wish to speak of it boldly: it makes me proud of my human condition. Yet people have often told me: there's nothing to be proud of. Yes, there is: this sun, this sea, my heart leaping with youth, the salt taste of my body and this vast landscape in which tenderness and glory merge in blue and yellow. It is to conquer this that I need my strength and my resources. Everything here leaves me in tact, I surrender nothing of myself, and don no mask: learning patiently and arduously how to live is enough for me, well worth all their arts of living. (68-9)

In *Le Mythe* Camus also speaks of passion as one of the consequences of an absurd reasoning. It concerns my passion to live over and against the certainty of my death, thereby establishing my relationship to the absurd universe. The absurd is the relation. But what is the movement in the relation of the absurd which takes me beyond nihilism?

In *Noces*, love and revolt are born from an aesthetic relation with the world, a relation which bears the same marks as an absurd awareness (105). However, the lyrical essays recognize and express the love born between the world and myself in my recognition of my belonging to it, to my unity with the life and death that is nature. Conversely, *Le Mythe* concludes with the recognition of an irreparable gap between me and a universe which remains silent in response to my deepest needs and questions. Of this silence, Camus states that “the final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human



inquiry and the silence of the universe” (R 6). In contrast, in “Nuptials at Tipasa” Camus claims that “it was neither I nor the world that counted, but solely the harmony and silence that gave birth to the love between us” (72). Here the silence of the universe is met with my own, giving birth to a love between us. What happens to the quality of this silence and the relationship it gives rise to in *Le Mythe*?

*Leap or wager?*

What creates the profound difference between these respective confrontations with life and death? If in fact *Le Mythe* can be interpreted as a resounding *no*, does Camus make a leap in *Le Mythe* after all? So says Cruickshank (63-64). And in a way Camus must. If the absurd is an impasse, as he concludes it is, it is undecidable as such (Todd 167). The divorce or gap also exists between thought and action – if all is equal, why act at all? A leap of sorts is required, then, in order to move from thought to action. Camus, however, defines the leap as a preference for ‘eternity’ in opposition to the immediate reality of finitude. Apropos of this, and as noted above, he asks:

Is one going to die, escape by the leap, rebuild a mansion of ideas and forms to one’s own scale? Is one on the contrary going to take up the heartrending and marvellous wager of the absurd? (MS 52)

Recall here the distinction between Pascal’s wager and Camus’s. On the face of it, the odds are in Pascal’s favour. His is a win-win, whereas Camus wagers on the flesh knowing he will lose. What is won, then, if only in the short term? He concludes that “the body, affection, creation, action, human nobility will then resume their places in this mad world. At last man will again find there the wine of the absurd and the bread of indifference on which he feeds his greatness” (MS 52).

Camus sees it as a choice between a leap and wager, between construct and lucidity. If he does make a ‘leap’ in *Le Mythe*, as Cruickshank asserts, it is not in the direction of the eternal, that is, the absurd is not used as a ‘springboard’ to the eternal. Rather, the absurd remains as that unreason or chaos which lies between the world and me. What is a residue of an experience of the world clearly is not taken as proof of another world by Camus, as it is by the rationalists and irrationalists.

Also as noted earlier, once a gap has opened between oneself and the world, this gap remains. The sensibility of the absurd is something like a virus which may lay dormant or in recession indefinitely, but will always exist as a possibility of disruption. In *Le Mythe*, Camus confronts this sensibility through will and consciousness, that is, through a discipline of mind he remains conscious in the face of what he takes to be true. And as he says, “seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable.” (43) The cause of this ‘intellectual malady’ is in fact just this consciousness which supports our revolt and so our existence. Again, Camus asks,

what constitutes the basis of the conflict, of that break between the world and my mind, but the awareness of it? If, therefore, I want to preserve it, I can, through a constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert. (52)

It is merely a question of whether one can live in harmony with that which lucidity indicates.

Rather than a leap, I suggest that Camus’s approach in *Le Mythe* amounts to a type of heroism, though quite unlike that of the Ancient Greeks. I believe that pagan heroism consists in the acceptance of fate and persistence in the face of it. The fight is entered with a lucid recognition of the odds and a simultaneous saying of *yes*. It is thus

marked by love. In contrast, it is difficult to hear the *yes* amid the cry of revolt in *Le Mythe*. The absurd attitude, like the aesthetic, is fundamentally marked by an admittance of all there is. Nevertheless, in *Le Mythe*, the recognition that my passion to live is linked to a metaphysical death sentence still sounds very much like a *no*. What is admitted here are the twin facts that I will die and that I have a passion to live. What appears to be occluded in this saying of *yes*, however, is a visceral acceptance of the root linkage of life and death. The cry of revolt against the absurd universe therefore sounds very much more like a *no* to death than a *yes* to life. While Camus recognizes the need for a new type of logic or reason in *Le Mythe*, one “which establishes a balance between evidence and lyricism, [which allows] us to achieve simultaneously emotion and lucidity” (12), there appears to be a slight fissure between assent and revolt. In the lyrical essays, by contrast, assent is intimately linked with revolt. In his first works, Camus seems to be saying that he loves existence and so lives it to the fullest, that is, in and through a fidelity to life, he revolts against its end. The absurd sensibility appears to be a lucidity marked only by will, that is, a lucidity of discipline as opposed to one of love. It is a lucidity of an unwearying vigilance of the mind as opposed to the lucidity born of love which presupposes a visceral trust in existence. Consciousness and will, however, are marks of the worst of Modernity, as distrust is of late- and post-Modernity – or perhaps this latter is merely the residue.

In both sensibilities, nature’s denial of man is recognized. Again, the universe is experienced as absurd in the lyrical essays as well, however differently. Of the link

between happiness and our passion to live in light of the awareness of our death, in “The Desert” Camus asks:

But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads? And what more legitimate harmony can link a man to life than the twin awareness of his longing to endure and the death that awaits him? At least he learns to count on nothing and to see the present as the only truth given to us ‘as a bonus’. (101-02)

The marks of the absurd, this twin awareness and the loss of ‘the future’ that it entails, are in the aesthetic sensibility linked to happiness whereas in the absurd attitude, it is attended by anxiety. I suggest this difference in tone between the respective confrontations with the absurd universe consists, at least in part, in the presence or absence of trust. Trust, like love, necessarily implies the other – be it nature or the one with whom I want to spend my life. Will points to and relies solely upon myself. While the experience of the absurd gives rise to a relationship, indeed *is* the relation between the world and me, it is an extremely attenuated one in opposition to the relationship experienced in an aesthetic awareness of the same world. To what does this point?

Once again, recall Camus’s strategy of undermining the very tradition he invokes. It is evidenced as early as the first page of *Le Mythe* where he alludes to and simultaneously subverts Pascal’s ‘reasons of the heart unknown to the mind.’ Camus instead speaks of “facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect” (11). Before the essay even begins, the reader is alerted that something slightly other is going on in *Le Mythe*. The concreteness of ‘facts’ evokes the abstractness of ‘reasons,’ even if they are of the heart. That I refuse the leap because I love life does not issue from a reason of the heart. That I refuse to leap is a fact. It is a fact of love. It cannot be otherwise, whereas a reason can be reconsidered, examined and

so on. While Camus speaks of passion and revolt as consequences of an absurd reasoning, it is odd that the movement of love, otherwise said, a fact of the heart, appears to be occluded in *Le Mythe*.

Somewhat later in *Le Mythe*, Camus further subverts the tradition in speaking of “a lower key of feelings, inaccessible to the heart but partially disclosed by the acts they imply and the attitudes of mind they assume” (18). I suggest that the visceral trust which attends the fact of love and the equally visceral distrust that results from its absence, at least in part constitutes this ‘lower key of feelings.’ One is rooted in the world in and through the fact of love or one is cut loose and set adrift. Camus’s odyssey, I believe, is to find his way back to the rootedness described in the lyrical essays which appears to be lost by the time he writes *Le Mythe*. The question with which this section began remains: What is the nature of the shadow that falls between the lyrical essays and *Le Mythe*? Otherwise said, what subverts Camus’s pagan sensibility and tradition? This question is the Ariadne Thread of the thesis.

## Chapter 2

### *Part I: On the intertextual context – A second approach*

#### *On dialogue*

As Camus wrote his lyrical essays, he was completing his dissertation “*Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme*.” In this work he explores what is distinctly Christian in the Christian metaphysics originating from the works of Augustine, who read a “religious way of thinking” (Dis 141), that of evangelical Christianity, through Plotinus’s Neo-Platonic categories and framework. According to Camus, his thesis concerns “the influence of a metaphysical doctrine on a religious way of thinking: a model to follow, once ambitions are aroused” (Dis 141). The thesis was completed in 1936; the essays in *L’Envers et l’endroit*, written between 1935 and 1936, were published in 1937; and the *Noces* essays, written between 1936 and 1937, were published in 1939. He wrote simultaneously, then, about contradictory sensibilities – that of the Christian and of his own pagan sensibility which historically was supplanted by the former. This prolific period includes *Le Mythe*, written between 1938 and 1941 and published in 1943. *L’Étranger*, completed in 1940, was published in 1942 and thus belongs to this period as well. The question asked here concerns their relationship – how are they to be read? One could read these texts in terms of the classical dialectic as is often done. If one were to take the lyrical essays and the dissertation as thesis and antithesis, they are followed by a synthesis in the *L’Étranger*, the text which precedes *Le Mythe*. But *L’Étranger* is a novel, not a new thesis.

There is no such tidy and clear progression amongst Camus's works. I think such an analysis of the relation of his texts is a disservice to his thought and to the very real struggle these questions caused him. Camus is not a 'philosopher's philosopher.' He is not interested in system and solution. His concern always is with our living reality, for which there is no final solution, in spite of which more than one attempt has been made in the West.

Recall here Camus's assertion that a creator's works "one after another ... complement one another, correct or overtake one another, contradict one another too" (103). I suggest that this understanding of the relationship between texts is basically dialogical, the original sense of dialectics. According to Hadot, as opposed to eristics, which is marked by an interest in argument for the sake of itself rather than with truth *per se*, "Platonic dialectics was not purely a logical exercise. Instead, it was a spiritual exercise which demanded that the interlocutors undergo an *askēsis*, or self-transformation" (62). Plato's understanding of dialectics, then, is marked by a willingness of the interlocutors to discuss the matter between them, during which "neither one of the interlocutors imposes his truth upon the other" (63).<sup>25</sup> Thus, one can consider each text as a particular voice, such that the conversation becomes denser with the entry of each new perspective and the various insights each brings. No one voice is absolute as each presents a limited, that is, a particular experience and vision of reality. For instance, I noted earlier that the *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* may well support a non-contextual reading as, I believe, this form best reflects the content of the text. Again, the experience of the

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<sup>25</sup> On the original sense of dialectics being dialogic, also see Eva Brann, *The Music of the Republic: Essays on Socrates' Conversations and Plato's Writings* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004), 88-245.

absurd is precisely a loss of context, “the divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting” (13). As such, it can be considered a literal image of precisely what the text is conveying, just as the tone of bravado that one can detect in *Le Mythe* from time to time may in fact echo the mixture of anxiety and courage which marks the absurd man. The first sets of lyrical essays are, precisely, lyrical in tone. In the 1958 preface of the second edition of *L’Envers et l’endroit*, Camus writes that “there is more love in these awkward pages than in all those that have followed” (6). This is reflected, I suggest, in the irony of restraint and passion which marks many of these essays, and the patience which marks others. *Noces* is a love prose-poem<sup>26</sup> to nature and a passionate statement of the relationship of love and revolt. Finally, *L’Étranger* is written in the French conversational tense, *passé composé*, that is, in the present perfect tense.<sup>27</sup>

The content of each text is, then, reflected in the tone in which it is expressed. In fact, sometime between late 1948 and early 1949, Camus notes about his writing that “[f]rom my first books (*Noces*) through to *Rope* and *The Rebel*, my whole effort has been in fact to depersonalize myself (each time in a different tone). Afterwards, I shall be able to speak in my own name” (NB/42: 137). In concert, the meaning which arises between these different voices, or better, tones, becomes richer just as any ongoing conversation of any weight has a tendency to do. And as with any conversation, there will be agreement, contradictions, transformations, apparent regressions, and so on. Moreover, as in any genuine conversation, where it is going cannot be prejudged. There is no end

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<sup>26</sup> Lilliam Hernández, “Vers un poétique de *Noces*,” in *Albert Camus 1980*, ed. Raymond Gay-Crosier (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1980), 142-148.

<sup>27</sup> René Girard, “Camus’s Stranger Retired,” in Bloom’s *Modern Critical Views: Albert Camus*, 79-105. The reference above is found on p. 99. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Girard.



strictly speaking, unless one forecloses on the conversation – either willfully and thus abruptly, or through inattention.

If indeed Camus's texts demand to be read in concert, I suggest that this need reflects the logic through and by which Camus experiences reality, namely, dialogically.<sup>28</sup> Just as one's logic shapes one's articulation of reality, Camus's literary structuration and content are, by necessity, seamless. While my logic is somewhat circular here, I think it is a hermeneutic rather than a vicious circle. I hope it is borne out in what follows. First I will consider the relationship between Camus's dissertation on Augustine and Christianity, the lyrical essays and *Le Mythe*. I will then introduce *L'Étranger* into the conversation.

*Dissertation, lyrical essays, Le Mythe de Sisyphe and L'Étranger*

As noted in chapter one, Camus looks toward Hellenistic philosophy and Greek tragedy as source and resource for rethinking ethical and political being. Again, in April 1948 Camus writes in his notebook, “[i]f, to outgrow nihilism, one must return to Christianity, one may well follow the impulse and outgrow Christianity in Hellenism” (NB/42: 183). And in January 1951 he notes, “[g]o back to the passage from Hellenism to Christianity, the true and only turning point in history...” (NB/42: 267). In his dissertation, he examines precisely the shift in cultural consciousness from that of the ‘Greek man’ to the ‘Christian.’ Simultaneously he wrote his lyrical essays. Again, the first set of essays is a series of slow, considered ponderings about mortality, that is, about the human condition. They concern our original *yes* and *no* to existence which entails

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<sup>28</sup> For a dialogic reading of Camus's works, see David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

both life and death together. The second set is a sustained prose-poem to nature written in the tone of love. I believe what Camus experienced during this period was a dissonance between two sensibilities and the recognition that we must begin from where we find ourselves. Strictly speaking, Camus considers the leap of the religious existentialists and that of the rationalists as being at root the same. Both groups use the absurd as a springboard to eternity and thus together they testify to the strength of our nostalgia for unity and the absolute. They simply result in different systems. However, insofar as the Judeo-Christian tradition has shaped the Western culture, it does render the leap of the religious existentialists more central to his concerns than does the leap of the rationalists. Indeed, according to Paul Archambault in his essay “Albert Camus et la métaphysique chrétienne,” the crux of Camus’s position is evidenced in the relationship between his dissertation (1936) and *L’Homme révolté* (1951). Archambault argues, correctly I think, that Camus returns to the former text and develops it in the latter. The heart of Camus’s argument, he claims, is that nature was subjected to the Judeo-Christian concept of history. The sacrality of the universe was thereby slowly emptied, such that by the 20<sup>th</sup> century the universe is understood solely in terms of conquest and tyranny.<sup>29</sup> And finally, “in giving infinite value to the soul in its fight with nature, Christianity ruptured the original unity of body/soul” (Archambault 215).

I suggest that as Camus simultaneously wrote his lyrical essays and dissertation, he began a lifelong conversation with Augustine, whom I take to be his primary

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Archambault, “Albert Camus et la métaphysique chrétienne,” in *Albert Camus 1980*, ed. Raymond Gay-Crosier (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1980), 210-217. The translation is my own. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Archambault.

interlocutor throughout his works. Of interest here are *L'Étranger* and *Le Mythe*. In the former, he creates a literal image of this conversation. And in the latter he examines what he sees as the result of this tectonic cultural shift 2000 years later – the experience of the absurd. Otherwise said, he addresses the problem of nihilism which he holds is intimately linked with Christianity.

In light of the magnitude of this shift and its consequences, I again want to emphasize how disturbing I find Nussbaum's assertion that most of us now take for granted an indifferent universe. While Nussbaum is perhaps largely correct to say that the ethical consequences have not been examined, I do not believe she asks why this is the case. Has the Western culture adapted such that this 'general awareness' has resulted in a new metaphysic, or are we simply oblivious to the implications of such an awareness? And what are the implications of such oblivion?

Again, oblivion is always more dangerous than awareness. And of course always easier. In *Le Mythe*, Camus describes precisely this type of oblivion in terms of habit or the relapse into the daily routine after a brief awakening to what he experienced as the living reality of an indifferent universe. Of all the experiences of the absurd, this brief awakening is the most critical for Camus. This is the experience of the divorce felt in relation to our daily routine, such that one comes to see the daily round as that of working to eat to sleep to work to eat to sleep *ad nauseam*. This experience is the definitive one. Of it he writes:

But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins' – this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return

into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery. (19)

It is in light of this living possibility that the brevity disturbs me.

Again, Camus always begins from and stays close to his experience. As discussed in chapter one, while he speaks of ‘a metaphysic’ in *Le Mythe*, he means by this only how we feel ourselves in reality. It concerns our living reality. As such, he speaks of the ‘universe’ in terms of ‘a metaphysic and an attitude of mind’ (17, 28). Like Camus, the religious existentialists and the phenomenologists begin from the experience of the absurd. Unlike him, they take the absurd as a conclusion rather than as merely the starting point. In examining the responses of the ‘irrationalists’ and ‘rationalists,’ he discovers that both approaches ‘lead to the same preaching’ (48). Both groups of thinkers succumb to what he refers to as our ‘nostalgia for the absolute and unity,’ which ‘is stronger here than knowledge’ (48). This desire for unity, which undergirds both the classical dialectic and our nostalgia for it, lies at the heart of what Camus understands as the antinomy of the human condition, namely, our desire for familiarity met by the prolixity of existence. Just as classical reason sacrificed one term of our condition, the singular, to this desire for unity, so contemporary thinkers make sacrifices in the service of this nostalgia – reason is sacrificed by the irrationalists; the singular by the phenomenologists. In opposition to an absurd reasoning, then, Camus outlines what he refers to as humiliated and triumphal reason, respectively (48). With these background notes, I can now enter the conversation proper. I will begin with Camus’s 1936 diploma dissertation, “*Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme*,” wherein he examines the cultural shift from Hellenism to Christianity.

*The dissertation – The conversation begins*

In his dissertation Camus explores what is distinctly Christian in the Christian metaphysics originating from the works of Augustine who read a religious way of thinking, that of evangelical Christianity, through Plotinus's Neo-Platonic categories and framework. Prior to deciding on this theme for his dissertation, Camus had considered a thesis on Eastern philosophy both because of an affinity with it and because his intellectual mentor, Louis Grenier, worked on it. Instead, he chose to write about the intersection of Hellenistic philosophy and evangelical Christianity which he believes has given shape to the Western culture until today. In a lecture he gave in 1957 entitled "Create Dangerously," Camus states that "there is no culture without legacy, and we cannot and must not reject anything of ours, the legacy of the West."<sup>30</sup> I suggest that this recognition of history and his grappling with our common inheritance, the Greek and Judeo-Christian, cannot be overemphasized in understanding Camus's work. And I believe it shapes his thought from the origin. In his choice to engage with the Western tradition, he opens a dialogue with it. It strikes me that his dissertation, written at the same time as his lyrical texts which express a pagan sensibility, form the backdrop or context against which his subsequent works need to be read. Otherwise said, the conversation starts here.

In the conclusion of his thesis Camus states that "if we reflect upon the main themes of Christianity, Incarnation, philosophy of history, the wretchedness of pain of

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<sup>30</sup> Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 249-272. This quote is found on p. 270. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as RRD.

the human condition, we realize that what counts in this context is the substitution of a ‘Christian’ man for a ‘Greek’ one” (152). Otherwise said, the birth of the Christian cosmos results from a fundamental shift in sensibility. Positively he asserts that evangelical Christianity’s ‘whole task is to combat this idleness of heart,’ that is, our unwillingness to consider our mortality or ‘the wretchedness of pain of the human condition.’ He favourably compares the rebirth of this mortal anxiety to what he saw as the almost ‘irenical philosophy of Socrates’ which followed the “the Greece of pessimism, insensible and tragic, [which] was the feature of a strong civilization” (152). His interest in returning to flesh and blood truths, which lies at the heart of all of Camus’s works, is thus present in his thesis as well.

Just as Camus juxtaposes two senses of metaphysic in *Le Mythe* – that of sensibility as opposed to construct, so Camus distinguishes in his dissertation between evangelical Christianity, which he says had practical concerns and a marked disinterest in speculation, and what can be called ‘Augustinism.’ He asserts that with Augustine’s works, “the evolution of primitive Christianity ends and the history of Christian teaching begins. [That is,] Augustinism marks a conclusion and a starting point” (Dis 150). It should be emphasized that for Camus, Christian metaphysics understood as system and thus as construct devolved from Augustine’s effort to grapple with specifically Christian issues such as the Incarnation and trinity, and with more general problems, primarily that of evil – which entails our mortal condition. However, he notes in his dissertation that by the time Augustine had died,

Christianity had become a philosophy. It is now sufficiently armed to resist the torment where everything founders, [that is, on our recognition of our mortality]. For

many years now it has remained the only hope and the only real shield against the misfortune of the Western world. In this way Christianity won its Catholicity. (152)

While he states it quite neutrally, I suggest he holds that it is this shield which has given lie to the human condition over the course of the West's history and which Camus addresses throughout his works. Again, and with Archambault, I too believe it lies at the heart of *L'Homme révolté* as will be considered later.

Also in the conclusion of his thesis, Camus considers the marks of the absurd and the reasoning which, sacrificing flesh and blood truths to our nostalgia for unity, ultimately leads to the lived condition of the absurd that he addresses in *Le Mythe*. He thus speaks of the paradoxes to which Christian metaphysics gives rise. He writes that

it is a paradox peculiar to the human mind that it can grasp the elements and be incapable of embracing the synthesis: epistemological paradox of science certain in its facts, but inadequate nonetheless: adequate in its theories, but nonetheless uncertain, or the psychological paradox of a self that can be grasped in its parts but is inaccessible in its profound unity. History does not free us from our disquiet in this regard, and to restore the profound originality of the Gospel seems to be an impossible task. (152)

These concerns resemble the existential and intellectual absurds spoken of in *Le Mythe*. They are, however, quite distinct from those he wrote about in the lyrical essays wherein the sensibility is pagan and the concern is very much with the world. It should be recalled that the characteristic marks of the absurd are also present in these essays. However, they are related to quite differently through an aesthetic sensibility as opposed to that of the absurd. Camus does not, however, admit of a 'simple return to paganism,' of a simple recovery. Two thousand years of history cannot be ignored. It has shaped the body of the West. Just as it is a disservice to our understanding of Greek thought to read it through a Christian or Modern prism, so there is a tension in a revaluation of the pagan sensibility

and values after a 2000-year trajectory has left its marks. His is a confrontation not only with our metaphysical possibilities then, but with our common history as well and the very real tension between.

In *Le Mythe*, Camus presupposes that the absurd is recognized only against its contrary. It is not merely 20<sup>th</sup> century religious existentialism that he critiques in this text. At stake I believe is the metaphysic this philosophy echoes and reinvokes – ‘Augustinism,’ which Camus identifies quite simply as Christianity in his thesis (187). Indeed, at the outset of *Le Mythe* Camus invokes his dissertation. Of the absurd man he states that “his exile is without remedy since his is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land” (MS 13). The references are to Plotinus and Augustine, respectively. And again, in *Le Mythe* Camus refers to the ‘churchmen’ which I believe is an allusion to Augustine.

Though I will not press this, I suggest there is a structural parallel between Augustine’s *Confessions* and *Le Mythe*, as well.<sup>31</sup> The last three chapters of the *Confessions* consist in an exegesis of the biblical *Book of Genesis*, which concerns the creator and the creation. Compare this with the end of *Le Mythe* in which Camus considers the creator and the absurd creation. Also like Augustine, Camus includes an exegesis of what can be considered his founding myth – the myth of Sisyphus. According to Camus, the ‘rock is still rolling’ and Sisyphus is the absurd man who

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<sup>31</sup> In *Camus’ Hellenic Sources*, Archambault asserts that Camus had “probably read parts or all of the *Confessions* in a French translation,” (165) references to which appear in his dissertation. Quite apart from the possibility of a structural similarity between *Le Mythe* and *Confessions*, I suggest that in the last novel Camus published during his lifetime, *La Chute*, there are echoes of Augustine’s philosophy and firm structural and formal similarities to his *Confessions*. I will consider this in chapter five.



teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile.... The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (MS 111)

In *Hellenic Sources*, Archambault asserts that

[i]t could be nothing in Camus would have been different had he never heard of Augustine; but I am inclined to think that Augustine served as a mirror that allowed Camus to discover those qualities that became characteristically his: his vibrant sensibility, the taste for moral issues, the conviction that any philosophical journey must begin with a withdrawal into oneself, or, as Augustine calls it, a 'reditus ad intima mea (*Confessions* VII, 10).' (167)

Camus's vibrant sensibility and concern with moral issues are clearly evidenced in his lyrical essays, which I believe are his ownmost. But this same sensibility and set of concerns are present in earlier pieces.<sup>32</sup> It is true, however, that at a point Camus says of himself that he is 'a pagan with Christian concerns.' As will be considered in the next section, his concerns are indeed much like those of Augustine's, in particular, the problem of evil which entails our mortality. Recall that Camus came face to face with his mortality at the age of seventeen, that is, prior to his work on Augustine. Thus, I am inclined to agree only with Archambault's last statement with, however, a qualification.

In the introduction to his translation of *Confessions*, R.S. Pine-Coffin claims that Augustine "is led from a confession of sin to confession of faith and finally to confession of God's glory."<sup>33</sup> Camus tracks a mirror trajectory which begins in his lyrical essays with a profession of the glory of the world, to one of unfaith to one of 'sin,' that is, to the

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<sup>32</sup> For texts which precede the lyrical essays examined in this paper, see Viallaneix's book, *Youthful Writings: The First Camus*. Included there are similarly lyrical pieces which Camus wrote from 1932-34.

<sup>33</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1981), 16. For substantive quotes, I use this translation throughout the paper. Subsequent references will be cited in the body of the paper as Con.

loss of relation with self, other and world, which he subsequently charts in *Le Mythe*. It appears to me that the latter text is understood by Archambault as the start of Camus's 'philosophical journey which begins with a withdrawal into oneself.' I suggest, rather, that it is the examination, as Camus states, of an intellectual malady which is marked precisely by withdrawal or better, by abstraction from one's living reality. And as I noted at the end of chapter one, I believe Camus's odyssey concerns finding a way back to the sense of rootedness he describes in the lyrical essays which is lost by the time of *Le Mythe*. Here I merely assert what is ultimately one of the intentions of this paper – to trace what I refer to as Camus's mirror trajectory. I believe Camus's works, which he maintains need to be read as a whole, are effectively his profession. Moreover, and again, I suggest his corpus follows a mirror trajectory to that of Augustine's, which can be considered his confession. At present, of interest are the historical and personal parallels between Augustine and Camus which would not have escaped Camus while writing his thesis on Augustine in 1936. I will briefly survey them here.

*Augustine and Camus – A mirror trajectory*

However many centuries separate them, Augustine and Camus were compatriots raised with the same pagan values. In fact, Camus once referred to Augustine as "that other African" (Hellenic Sources 167). They lived through uncannily similar times as well. Strictly speaking, there were no barbarian invasions in the West during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as happened during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries when Augustine wrote. However, just as there was a collapse of the pagan civilization then, so the 20<sup>th</sup> witnessed a virulent barbarism and an increasingly widespread awareness that the dominant cosmos or

metaphysic, the Christian and its Modern variants, had largely crumbled. Camus also notes that Augustine wrote during the period of Roman totalitarianism. And of course Camus too wrote during a period which witnessed a number of totalitarian regimes.

Further, Camus's description of Augustine in his thesis is almost a self-description. He describes Augustine as "a very passionate man, and a sensual one" (142), as was Camus. Indeed, Camus, like Augustine in his youth, was "captivated by aesthetic beauty and enthralled by the quest of sexual fulfilment."<sup>34</sup> Finally, the problems which plague Augustine are Camus's, namely, the problem of evil, the fear of death, and a concern with what can be known with certainty. It is interesting to note that following Augustine's disenchantment with the Manicheans, with whom he had spent ten years, and just prior to his conversion to Christianity, he flirted with scepticism which holds that nothing can be known with any certainty except in pure mathematics (Chadwick xix). Unlike Augustine, Camus never relinquishes his metaphysical scepticism, which was not doctrinaire but rather a type of *askēsis*. In fact, it is on the basis of this *askēsis* that he arrives at the truths of 'the body' as opposed to those of 'the mind.' I will return to this below. As to the problem of evil, in the "Unbelievers and Christians," fragments from a 1948 statement made at the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg, Camus says, "I feel rather as Augustine did before becoming a Christian when he said: 'I tried to find the source of evil and I got nowhere.'"<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), ix. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Chadwick.

<sup>35</sup> Albert Camus, "The Unbelievers and Christians," in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, 69-74. This quote is found on p. 73.

They also share the method with which they approach these concerns. According to Hadot, for the Ancients, Mediaevals and some Moderns, the practice of philosophy is first a way of life and only secondarily a theory which in turn supports one's existential choice (275-7). This understanding of philosophy stands in stark contrast to what now is considered by most as the 'discipline of.' Camus recognizes that Augustine was not, in the first instance, writing a 'metaphysics.' Like Camus, he was grappling with flesh and blood problems. In his thesis, Camus notes that "there is something peculiar to the author of the *Confessions*, namely, that his own experience continues to be the constant point of reference for all his intellectual inquiries" (143). The same can be said of Camus. Thus, both Camus and Augustine practice philosophy in its truest sense. Their work first and foremost concerns an 'undergoing,' that is, the heart of their work involves a 'transformation of the self' rather than a theory about the self, the world and so forth. As such, like Camus, Augustine has something at stake, that is, he is wagering on something.

In light of these comments, I now want to consider the primary historical and personal exigencies which I suggest underlie Augustine's texts, and which, by the end of Modernity, are Camus's as well however differently. According to Camus, Augustine was "Greek in his need for coherence, Christian in the anxieties to which his sensibility gave rise" (Dis 142). As to the former need, and with Camus, I believe Augustine was articulating his experience in the manner which best suited his temperament and in the forms available to him – Plotinus's categories and framework. Again, to consider Augustine's works, such as the *City of God*, as metaphysical treatises is ahistorical at best. He was responding to his times in his role as bishop. While a Christian metaphysics

was derived from what can be referred to as his ‘writings of circumstance’ (Hadot 163), I think they can be considered as Augustine’s form of witnessing, just as Camus witnessed to his age. What, then, were the key historical and personal exigencies which informed Augustine’s works and subsequently Camus’s?

As Camus says, Augustine was a very sensuous and passionate man. If one has heard nothing else of what Augustine has said, surely most have heard his famous prayer, ‘Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.’ In his dissertation, Camus makes note of the ‘ferocity’ with which Augustine attacks a contemporary bishop and theologian, Pelagius. In opposition to Augustine’s doctrine of original sin and his claim of the absolute dependence of man on God’s grace to do the good, the Pelagians argue that “creation is already a grace..., a support, a testimonial, which God gives us” (Dis 145). And Pelagius writes, “I say that a man can be without sin” (Dis 145). Camus claims that with Pelagius’s rejection of the doctrine of original sin, which the latter held ‘entails Manichean conclusions,’ his “teaching puts its trust in man and scorns explanations which refer to the will of God. It is also an act of faith in the nature and independence of man” (Dis 145). According to Camus, such a doctrinal position was experienced by Augustine as ‘a mortal attack given his deeply felt sense of sin,’ which Camus holds is primarily bodily in nature. He states that Augustine’s “resolution of his doubts and of his distaste for the flesh did not lie in intellectual escape but in the total acknowledgement of his depravity and wretchedness” (142). While Augustine developed the doctrine of original sin in order to account for and to reconcile the existence of evil with the notion of an all powerful and good God, it is not in the first instance a ‘theory’ which ‘explains’

evil and death. Again, Augustine's starting point is always his personal experience and everything is brought back to this. Otherwise said, his doctrinal positions are, in the first instance, responses to existential needs.

In light of this, I suggest that the doctrine of original sin, as formulated by Augustine, may be understood as enabling him to assume his acts which, alone with his profound sense of sin, I imagine he could not bear. If one is able to say, 'it's not like me,' 'the body is to blame, not me,' 'I am not my body,' one can take a degree of distance from the passions. To abstract from 'one's body' is an abstraction from pain and suffering, from an originary opacity. It is also an abstraction from radical finitude and thus supports the 'stubborn hope in the human heart' that we are not subject to the metaphysical death sentence. In brief, given Augustine's struggle with the problem of evil, which entails our mortality, he had a personal exigency in abandoning his body, and so, the body. But witness the trap of language – to speak of 'the body' in distinction from either soul or mind – as if there were such a 'substratum.' It is, rather, an abstraction from ourselves, from living reality.

Augustine's exigencies are of course linked to his personal needs, but also to those of his times. In Augustine's time, the end of the pagan cosmos, nature was loved much as Augustine loved God. A theology like that of St. Francis of Assisi of the 12<sup>th</sup> century would have done little to persuade the larger part of the population of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries that their experience of the cosmos was 'missing something.' In fact, they would have felt very much at home with Assisi's nature religion. How to shift a cosmic vision? The first step is to take a distance from it, to 'name.' Unlike Augustine, Camus

generally does not speak about ‘nature’ or ‘the body.’ As with speaking about ‘the body’, to speak about ‘nature’ both presupposes and implies what it is not – ‘spirit.’ This is the result of an original act of abstraction, however. Camus therefore usually uses such locutions as the ‘universe’ or ‘world’ and the ‘passions’ or ‘heart,’ respectively. Indeed, Camus is extremely wary of ‘naming.’ For instance, in “The Enigma,” a lyrical essay written in 1950, he speaks of people asking him to identify what it is he seeks. He writes,

I do not know what I am looking for, cautiously I give it a name, I withdraw what I said, I repeat myself, I go backward and forward. Yet people insist I identify my term or terms, once and for all. Then I object; when things have a label aren’t they already lost?<sup>36</sup>

I suggest that Augustine’s attitude toward nature needs to be read with his personal and historical exigencies in mind. I will not belabour Augustine’s denigration of nature and the body, but sixteen hundred years later, we can see what his attitude toward nature, which is the body, has reaped. And sixteen hundred years later, Camus’s interests are consequently fundamentally those of the body and nature, as will be considered throughout this paper.

*Pilgrimage and odyssey – Remedy or recovery?*

I believe the heart of every question and problem posed by both Camus and Augustine is, ‘of what can I be certain?’ I am equally certain that their respective answers are the same – love. Augustine sets out on a pilgrimage to find it, Camus an odyssey. Augustine seeks a creator whom he calls ‘God.’ Camus seeks the creation which I

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<sup>36</sup> Albert Camus, “The Enigma,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 154-161. The quote is found on p. 155. This piece is included in *Summer*.

believe he identifies simply as ‘Ithaca.’ In his 1948 lyrical essay entitled “Helen’s Exile,” Camus writes of Odysseus that

on Calypso’s island [he] is given the choice between immortality and the land of his fathers. He chooses this earth, and death with it. Such simple greatness is foreign to our minds today. Others will say that we lack humility, but the word, all things considered, is ambiguous.... [W]e simply lack the pride of the man who is faithful to his limitations – that is, the clairvoyant love of his human condition.<sup>37</sup>

Camus offsets the Christian and pagan understanding of pride in “Nuptials at Tipasa,” written shortly after his dissertation. For the Christians it is ‘Lucifer’s sin,’ whereas for Camus it is “the pride in living that the whole world conspires to give me.”<sup>38</sup> In *Camus*, David Sherman makes a useful distinction between a ‘natural’ and ‘reflective pride.’ The latter is ‘self-justifying,’ whereas the former is “marked by an utter lack of self-referentiality.”<sup>39</sup> Otherwise said, a reflective pride redounds to my ‘self.’ Conversely, a natural pride is simply the deep joy felt in relation to man’s condition, which I believe Camus understands in terms of the happiness Sisyphus feels as he rolls his rock unceasingly.

Augustine imagines an end to his pilgrimage, a remedy for his deep sense of sin and the attendant anxiety and loneliness of the human condition. He believes it is to be found in the glory of God. Camus desires a return to the human condition and the attendant anxiety, loneliness and grandeur of this condition. He interprets ‘glory’ as “the

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<sup>37</sup> Albert Camus, “Helen’s Exile,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 148-153. The quote is found on p. 152. This piece is included in *Summer*.

<sup>38</sup> Albert Camus, “Nuptials at Tipasa,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 65-72. This quote is found on p. 70.

<sup>39</sup> David Sherman, *Camus* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 23. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Sherman.



right to love without restraint,” asserting that “those who need myths are indeed poor.”<sup>40</sup> The heart of the absurdist position is that there is no remedy to the human condition, at least none of which I can be certain here and now. Our task is to live ‘without myths or consolation.’ At best there is the possibility of a recovery of the human condition, that is, a living awareness of our finitude. Recall that the pivotal experience of the absurd is awakening from a life lived mechanically, that is, from a life lived without any real thought and thus a life without any real personal decisions. No one in their right mind can or would seek to be awoken from this quiet slumber. Once we have been though, what is to be done? This is the moment we decide – to slide quietly back to sleep or to awaken to all the attendant anxiety and profound loneliness which has been awakened in us, at least for a moment. Pass it by. It will return. Of this we can be certain, too. Again, the experience of the absurd is like a virus. It may lay dormant for years, but that does not necessarily mean it can be put to rest for good.

For Camus, love is an unholy certainty or a holy uncertainty. For Augustine, love of God is the only certainty and the only holy love. All other loves are holy only insofar as they are mediated by this highest one. Augustine wagers on eternity. The pilgrim of course is never sure of her end, as God chooses the elect. But one stands to win ‘eternal life.’ The alternative to this is eternal damnation at the hands of a God who loves us. Still Augustine believes in the value of this wager. What a strange end to a pilgrimage though. Could a God of love conceive such an absolute end to what is, after all, a finite pilgrimage? Could a God of love who, according to Augustine, invites us to enter

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<sup>40</sup> These quotes regarding glory are from “Nuptials at Tipasa” (LCE 68).

relationship with him desire to eternally sever relations with the many whose end, apparently, is hell? What happens to the open-endedness of our pilgrimage, that is, to God's love to which Augustine testifies in his confession? I believe he contradicts what he knows with his heart.

Again, on Camus's reading of the Christian postulate of eternity, Christianity is, or at least becomes, a myth that serves to "relieve me of the weight of my own life ... [which] I much carry ... alone" (MS 54). Moreover, this very 'hope of another life one must 'deserve'' is a betrayal of life. Instead, Camus 'wagers on the flesh,' knowing full well he will lose, having arrived at least at the mathematical certainty that he will die. In light of Augustine's speech of a wager in his *Confessions*, it is possible that the weight of the concept of 'the wager' in *Le Mythe* may well be derived equally from Augustine and Pascal's use of this term.

The works of Camus and Augustine intersect in the body. As pagans, both Camus and Augustine start from the body and both are led to a recognition of 'sin,' loosely speaking in Camus's case, strictly in Augustine's. Camus's entire work is a profession of the body as witness; Augustine's is a confession of the baring of the soul in the shedding of the body. For Camus, our first and only 'sin' is this betrayal of the body, that is, of life. For Augustine, sin is betrayal by the body. In Augustine's case, what is betrayed? For Camus, to speak of the spirit in distinction from the body is an abstraction from our original condition. This is the first lie, the first sin. For Augustine, to speak of spirit over body is the beginning of salvation – 'now but not yet.'

It need be noted here that to interpret Augustine's relationship to the body as one marked by hatred is an egregious error. God saw it and said it is good – so too Augustine. Rather, I suggest that Augustine harboured a deep-seated fear of the body – that is, of the site of mortality. And as I argue throughout this paper, this deep-seated distrust of the body, that is, the fear of nature which begins with Augustinism, renders Western man a shade wandering amidst the shadows.

Using the absurd as a springboard in the service of our nostalgia for the absolute and unity is a leap. Like the classical dialectic of Greek philosophy, acts of abstraction are required in order to reach this unity. What is involved in every act of abstraction? We always abstract from something originally given, that is, from something singular. As it is I who perform the act of abstraction, my interests are involved. When my question is existential, not merely academic or intellectual, from what do I abstract? I suggest that what we abstract from, that is, what we choose to leave behind, depends in equal parts on what we cannot bear and on what we seek, which generally speaking is remedy of what we cannot bear. Moreover, a thinker, in reflecting on her times, necessarily reflects her times. To read a thinker's work in abstraction from the personal and historical context in which it is written is surely going to skew one's understanding of that work, then. One must also consider the thinker's intention, execution and 'fallout,' the latter clearly not being within the control of the writer. As Camus asserts of thought in general and of Augustine's in particular, "[h]onesty requires one to judge a doctrine by its summits, not by its by-products" (Hellenic Sources 163). Still, the fallout or by-products must be considered as well, which Camus undertakes in subsequent works.

I am certain that Augustine's leap is a leap of love. There are few pieces amongst the Western literature of love which can compare with Augustine's invocation of God as lover in book X, chapter 27 of his *Confessions*. There he writes,

I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love you late! You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself and, disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of your creation. You were with me, but I was not with you. The beautiful things of this world kept me far from you and yet, if they had not been in you, they would have had no being at all. You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew my breath and now I gasp for your sweet odour. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace. (231-32)

This can be read as Augustine's invocation of love, his paean to love, which he calls God.

I believe it is in reference to this invocation that Camus's statement about wrenching love back from eternity is best understood. He claims that

absurdity can be defined by the opposition between *what lasts* and *what does not*. It being understood that there is only one way to last and that is eternally and there is no middle way. We belong to the world which does not last. And everything which does not last – and only that – is ours. *What we must then do is wrench love back from eternity or at least from those who disguise it as an image of eternity.* (NB/42: 37; the last set of italics is mine)

With Camus, and in way of summary, it can be said that in the first light, creation, the body, are beautiful. They are seen and they are good. In our unfaith, in our abstraction from this, our living reality, all becomes unnatural. All becomes sin. This is the first lie. This is the first sundering. Then we need to redeem it – to return to the good, to the natural. But this is a construct only after its first destruction. If the original sundering is

not experienced, if the first lie is not refused, there is no way back. One need undergo. And Camus's body of work, I suggest, is a record of his odyssey of undergoing.

I believe Camus saw his era as a kairotic time to wrench love back from eternity, that is, from those who disguise it as an image of eternity, in order to lavish it upon a creation too long without it. The question is whether we will choose to take this opportunity or squander it. Camus invites us to at least consider it. I suggest his works are an odyssey of recovery. This is not to say we will find a remedy – there is no remedy to the human condition in living reality. But it may result in the recovery of it – which consists in you, me and the world. In spite of what it cost him, both personally and publicly, Camus remained lucid and courageous throughout his odyssey. The least we can do is accept his invitation to stand in the midst of the rubble and see what comes into view. That it is still a kairotic time is evidenced by Nussbaum's blithe recognition that generally speaking, we are all now able to grant at least the idea of a largely indifferent universe, even if, on her account, we have yet to consider the ethical consequences of such a metaphysic. Camus did. Thus his odyssey remains timely.

How can we best see what comes into view in the midst of the rubble? A discourse about it, a philosophical treatise concerning it, risks remaining just that – an idea with which we can play endlessly, that is, dialectically. This hardly touches us where we live. Again, Camus is an artist and thinker. In a January 1936 notebook entry, Camus writes, “[p]eople can think only in images. If you want to be a philosopher, write

novels.”<sup>41</sup> As early as August 1937, one can see traces in his notebook of the themes which appear in *L'Étranger*. There is an outline of a novel with three parts: “Part I, His life until then; Part II, Life as a game; Part III, The rejection of compromise and the discovery of truth in nature” (NB/35: 25). During this period of Camus’s life, his earliest works, from the dissertation to *L'Étranger*, stand together. They do not follow each other in the linear fashion that the classical dialectic reading prefers. Rather, their relationship mirrors that of a conversation, however cacophonous initially, as all speak together during this period. As the conversation continues, however, what there is to be seen slowly emerges. As such, it is to *L'Étranger*, written in the midst of this prolific period, that we can now turn to see what begins to come into view.

*Part II: A literal image of the absurd: An introduction to L'Étranger*

*L'Étranger* is an odd novel. I did not understand it at all when I first read it as an adolescent, the age when most are first exposed to it, and I imagine I will read it in the years to come and discover more in it in spite of its brevity and apparent simplicity. It is a short novel consisting of two largely parallel parts. The first part of the book covers the length of ten days in the life of Meursault, a man without a first name and the stranger of the title. He is an office clerk in Algiers who is made happy by a swim in the sea or by watching the street from his balcony for the length of a Sunday afternoon and evening. The only adjective I can think to describe his life is ‘unremarkable.’ He spends his days at work, the beach and occasionally at Celeste’s diner. The novel opens with Meursault

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<sup>41</sup> Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), 5. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as NB/35. [*Carnets, 1935-1942*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.]

announcing the death of his mother, who died either today or yesterday depending on how he reads the telegram he receives. He cannot decide on the basis of it. He merely notes it. He attends his mother's funeral, meets Marie when he returns to Algiers the following day and begins an affair with her. On the tenth day Meursault shoots an unnamed Arab on a beach, firing a fatal first shot, followed by four more after a brief pause.

These are the highlights of Part 1. Part 2, chapter 1, opens with Meursault speaking about his interviews with the examining magistrate; in chapter two he talks about "some things [he'd] never liked talking about,"<sup>42</sup> namely, "the end of the day,... the nameless part, when evening noises would rise up from every floor of the prison in a cortège of silence" (79); in the third and fourth chapters he speaks of his two days in court, which occur roughly a year after the murder; and in the fifth we meet the prison chaplain with whom Meursault has refused to speak three times prior to this final visit. Meursault's days are basically over, having received the death sentence for murdering the Arab. The book thus comes to an end.

As noted earlier, the novel is written in the *passé composé*, a conversational tense. I suggest that the use of this tense is the key to understanding *L'Étranger* and as such, it constitutes the primary demand the story places on the reader. One is invited to listen as one would to any person, each of whom speaks with a pace and inflection of her own. As

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<sup>42</sup> Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Joseph Laredo, with an Afterword by Albert Camus, 8 January 1955, pp. 118-19 (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1983), 71. As this part of the chapter focuses on *L'Étranger*, references will be cited simply by page number in the body of the paper. In subsequent chapters, citations appearing in the body of the text will be identified as L'E. [*L'Étranger*. Paris: Gallimard, 1942.]

with any conversation, if we do not listen carefully, not merely to the words spoken but to the manner in which they are spoken as well, we risk missing the tone of a conversation. If one reads the novel without attending to the fact that it is Meursault speaking, and instead simply reads the story, both the tone of the text and plot are rather flat. Indeed, Camus's style in *L'Étranger* is often compared with that of Hemingway and the 'tough guy' style of narrative. However, Meursault notices details, that is, facts which he notes. All of them – 'the bright blue eyes' and 'reddish complexion' of the caretaker at the home in which he placed his elderly mother; the "row of shiny screws, which hadn't yet been tightened down, [standing] out against the walnut-stained wood" (12) of his mother's coffin; the white skin under the black hair on his mate's arm, Raymond, which disgusts him; the cats that take over the street during the quiet time of the day, returning only when silence reigns again in late evening; and by the beach, "the brilliant white asphodels standing out against... a hard blue sky" (51). Meursault rarely says 'I think...'. He largely says 'I noticed,' 'I realized,' 'I remembered,' and uses such locutions as 'I felt I shouldn't have said that' rather than 'I thought I shouldn't....' He notices colour, smell, texture and sound, together. For example, upon waking in his cell after the visit of the chaplain, he says "I woke up with stars shining on my face. Sounds of the countryside were wafting in. The night air was cooling my temples with the smell of earth and salt" (116).

René Girard says of this narrative technique that

when an existence as uneventful as that of Meursault is described in minute detail, without any humour, an atmosphere of tense expectation is automatically created. As I read the novel, my attention is focused upon details that are insignificant in themselves but that come to be regarded as portents of doom just because the writer



has seen fit to record them. I sense that Meursault is moving toward a tragedy, and this impression, which has nothing to do with the hero's actions, seems to arise from them. (Girard 87)

He also describes Camus's style as '*écriture blanche*,' giving "an effect of grayish monotony" (Girard 99). It is difficult to hold together such entirely contrary impressions as a sense of doom and of a grayish monotony. The details Meursault notes in Part 1 prior to the murder are simply that – details, facts. It is how this particular man sees and experiences. He is noting his days which at the end include a murder. Girard's first impression, then, appears to ignore the fact that it is Meursault speaking of these events. It is not merely a 'writer recording' them, as Girard states. As to Girard's latter impression, I believe it serves his interpretation of this novel which argues that Camus, while writing *L'Étranger*, is a solipsist who all but erases the fact that he is speaking to others through his narrative technique.

Any novel of note has multiple interpretations, of course. This particular novel invites it. Indeed, *L'Étranger* demands it. In what follows, I will briefly outline the various scholarly readings of *L'Étranger*. Then I will examine it in terms of its structure. Again, as a consummate artist and an accomplished student of Nietzsche, Camus takes the relationship of form and content seriously. During the analysis, both the interpretation of 'the law,' that is of court, public and Christian, and Meursault's side will be examined.

#### *A history of interpretation*

Given Camus's interest in history, my initial approach to *L'Étranger* concerns the history of its reception. First, there appears to be a certain indecision regarding the translation of its title into English. The first translation by Stuart Gilbert reigned for close

to four decades. It was published by Knopf of New York in 1946 under the title *The Stranger*. It was simultaneously published by Hamish Hamilton of London as *The Outsider*. It was reissued in 1954 by Vintage as *The Stranger*; and by Penguin Books in 1961 as *The Outsider*. The second translation, by Joseph Laredo, was published under the title *The Outsider* by Hamish Hamilton in 1982. In 1989, it reappeared as *The Stranger* in a third translation by Matthew Ward from Vintage. Internationally, the title is most commonly translated as *The Foreigner*. However, this is a translation of a translation, the nuances of which are therefore suspect. Thus I simply note it.

Of interest here are the nuances of the respective titles of the English translations – ‘the outsider’ and ‘the stranger.’ An outsider lives apart from the society of which he is a part, either by exclusion or by choice. In the latter case, it can be said that he sees the ‘lies’ and refuses to ‘play the game,’ though he is familiar with it. A stranger, on the other hand, is not an outsider but from the outside. However much he might be aware of ‘the game,’ it is not his by birthright. He is therefore much more threatening and thus more threatened, too.

I note this in passing, but it should be recalled that Camus, a Frenchman, was an Algerian by birth where pagan values still held sway. He was living in exile in northern Europe when *L'Étranger* was published, though he had written it while still living in Algeria.<sup>43</sup> He is both the stranger and the outsider, then. Internally as well, inasmuch as his pagan sensibility was trained in the intellectual traditions of the North. Perhaps

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<sup>43</sup> Camus’s first novel, *La mort heureuse*, was posthumously published in 1971 and is considered the prototype for *L'Étranger*. Written and reworked between 1936 and 1938, Camus decided not to publish it.

Camus is the stranger made an outsider to himself. While the ambiguity of the title in translation is felicitous at best, it is worth noting.

As to the translations *per se*, the changes in title may well be the result of purely mercenary concerns – how to sell a new edition? How to justify two new translations? One can never discount this type of motivation. However, even if one refuses to entirely discount mercenary publishing houses, the alternative titles may have to do with cultural-historical factors and taste as well, which brings me to a brief survey of the history of the readings of this novel. I suggest that they tend to reflect the dominant cultural concerns during the time of the respective interpretations. Broadly speaking, there are three categories of interpretation, though with overlaps: the existential, the psychoanalytic and the historical. I will consider each of these briefly.

*i. The existential approach*

Generally speaking, an existentialist reading of the novel considers Meursault as the ‘authentic individual’ who refuses ‘to play the game,’ that is, he is ‘unmarked by convention.’ He thereby lives over and against an ‘inauthentic society.’ In *Camus*, Adele King states that Meursault lives “a life with no transcendent value, absurd in itself, but which is the only value to which he can cling. In accepting his life and his death, Meursault finds a strange peace and a sense of harmony with the external world.”<sup>44</sup> In this approach, the focus lies primarily upon the character of Meursault. The key traits of his character are his concern with ‘external reality’ and his ‘refusal to play the game,’ that is, his refusal to lie. As to plot analysis, this interpretation generally holds that

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<sup>44</sup> Adele King, *Camus* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), 47. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as King.

Meursault is convicted not for the murder, but for not crying at his mother's funeral. Hence, *L'Étranger* is considered an absurdist novel which stands in a direct and unchanged relationship to *Le Mythe*. Meursault, then, is the absurd man. These are the bare bones of the existentialist interpretation however crudely drawn. In this sketch, Meursault is the quintessential 'outsider,' not the 'stranger.'

However, it appears that Meursault is embedded in the world. It is not 'external' to him. He is at home with the first given, the creation – all the smells, colours, sounds, and textures. For instance, while returning from court to the prison van he says,

I recognized the familiar smells and colours of a summer evening. In the darkness of my mobile prison I rediscovered, one by one, as if rising from the depths of my fatigue, all the familiar sounds of a town that I loved and of a certain time of the day when I sometimes used to feel happy. The cries of the newspaper sellers in the languid evening air, the last few birds in the square, the shouts of the sandwich seller, the moaning of the trams high in the winding streets of the town and the murmuring of the sky before darkness spills over onto the port, all these sounds marked out an invisible route which I knew so well before going into prison. (93)

He is also very much at home in his job as a clerk and in his daily routines.

It is true that he does not 'play the game,' but as Camus notes in his 1955 Afterword of *The Outsider*, "you must ask yourself in what way Meursault doesn't play the game" (118). The existential interpretation asserts that he does not lie. But as Conor Cruise O'Brien points out in his text, *Camus*, Meursault does lie. For instance, he lies in a letter he writes on behalf of his mate, Raymond, and he later bears false witness at the police station, again on Raymond's behalf.<sup>45</sup> However, Camus asserts that Meursault does refuse to say "more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, [lying is] saying

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<sup>45</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus* (London, England: Fontana, 1970), 21. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as O'Brien.

more than one feels” (118), which he also avoids. Whether Meursault is convicted because he does not cry at his mother’s funeral will be considered below.

The fundamental problem with an existentialist reading of *L’Étranger* is that Camus disavowed all association with this movement. The novel, however, was written and launched in northern Europe in the midst of the Second World War, during the rise of existentialist philosophy. It is by an accident of history, then, that it has been erroneously linked with existentialism.

It has been suggested that if one were born in Algeria, Meursault would not appear at all like an outsider. On this view, his laconic style of speech and discretion, widely interpreted as taciturnity and disengagement, would be understood as quite natural to a native. To consider Meursault as the authentic individual, then, is a distortion of character. Indeed, the concept of the individual derives from Christianity, however distorted it becomes in Modernity. By the nineteenth century, it largely devolves into the ‘romantic self’ alone with infinite longings. The individual of existentialism is finally alone, having neither the eternal or infinite nor a sense of embeddedness in the world. This latter is entirely unlike Meursault.

The perennial appeal of *L’Étranger* to adolescents, the age of rebellion, is not surprising, however. And at the time of its publication, Europe and its values were bankrupt. The faith in both the Christian cosmos and its transfiguration by Modernity into universal enlightenment and endless progress had collapsed, rendering those undergoing it strangers to themselves. The simultaneous publication of Gilbert’s translation in 1946

under the two titles is felicitous here as well then, again regardless of the potentially mercenary motives of the publishing houses.

ii. *The psychoanalytic approach*

The psychoanalytic approach overlaps the existential interpretation but unlike the latter, it tends to focus on the psychology of both the character of the novel, Meursault, and of Camus, the writer. For instance, in *The Unique Creation of Albert Camus*, Donald Lazere asserts, like the existentialists, that this novel stands with *Le Mythe*. Unlike the existentialists, however, Lazere holds that they are not related in a one to one correspondence.<sup>46</sup> He notes the contradictions and reversals between Camus's texts. He states that this 'interdependency' amongst the whole of Camus's work "enriches it with an additional ambiguity" (6-7). Nonetheless, he maintains that Camus's method is dialectical in the sense that there are theses and antitheses resulting in dialectical syntheses (4). Again with the existentialists, Lazere interprets *L'Étranger* as a novel about social revolt. Of this revolt, though, he states that it "leads in the negative direction of unbridled egocentric license and nihilistic murder" (10). This egoism is overcome dialectically in Camus's next philosophical essay, *L'Homme révolté*, wherein Camus asserts "the absolute value of every life and the solidarity of all men in revolt against death" (10). Quite apart from the question as to whether *L'Étranger* is fundamentally a novel about social revolt, which I argue is the case only on an existentialist reading of

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<sup>46</sup> Donald Lazere, *The Unique Creation of Albert Camus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 6. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Lazere.

this novel, is the question as to whether Meursault denies the absolute value of every life, thereby rendering him a nihilist. That he does not and is not should become clear below.

René Girard's interpretation, a more purist psychoanalytic approach, tends primarily toward an analysis of Camus as opposed to that of the character Meursault. With Lazere, he asserts that, "Meursault is the fictional embodiment of the nihilistic individualism expounded in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and commonly referred to as *l'absurde*" (79). Unlike Lazere, Girard asserts that "the work is not one of social protest but of individual protest, even though the author welcomes the ambiguity, or at least does nothing to dispel it" (86).

Girard simultaneously draws parallels between and analyzes what he sees as characteristics shared by Meursault and Camus. For instance, he describes Camus as a young and ambitious author at the time of writing *L'Étranger* who is simultaneously solipsistic and needful of recognition. He takes the young Camus as a 'romantic.' He asks,

why does Camus crave solitude and society at the same time; why is he both repelled and fascinated by *les autres*? The contradiction is really inherent in the Romantic personality. The Romantic does not want to be alone, but *to be seen alone*. (94)

He describes Meursault in a similar manner, asserting that there is a "contradiction between the first and second Meursault, between the peaceful solipsist and the martyr of society" (87). While he recognizes that Meursault is not an autobiographical figure, he does assert a great deal of overlap between the creation and the creator.

Girard writes of the relationship between the novel and Camus that

*L'Étranger*, as the expression of egotistical values and meanings, forms a structure, a relatively stable 'world view.' Camus 'sincerely' believed in his and, consequently, in

Meursault's innocence, because he passionately believed in the guilt of the 'judges.'  
(90)

He argues that Camus required 'an innocent murder' as he sets out to prove "the judges are always wrong" (88). Camus, writes Girard,

wanted to arouse an indignation that he himself felt, and he had to take into account the demands of elementary realism. In order to become a martyr, Meursault had to commit some truly reprehensible action, but in order to retain the sympathy of the readers, he had to remain innocent. (87)

As such, in *L'Étranger* stress is laid on the fact that Meursault does not cry at his mother's funeral rather than on the murder itself. For instance, during the trial, Meursault's lawyer cries out in frustration, "'But after all, is he being accused of burying his mother or of killing a man?'" (93) According to Girard, "we are gently led to the incredible conclusion that the hero is sentenced to death not for the crime of which he is accused and that he has really committed, but for his innocence" (88). In this way,

Meursault will die an innocent, and yet his death sentence will be more significant than a mere judicial error.

This solution is really no solution at all. It can only hide, it cannot resolve, the contradiction between the first and second Meursault, between the peaceful solipsist and the martyr of society. (87)

Girard asserts that "a really close reading [of *L'Étranger*] leads... to questioning the structure" (88). And in light of a close reading, Girard interprets this contradiction as a 'logical flaw in the structure of the novel' which Camus renders obscure through a sleight of hand, namely, through the "skillful narrative technique [which] makes it very difficult to perceive" (87).

Finally, Girard also reads Camus dialectically but in an abbreviated manner. He argues that Camus eventually recognizes and confesses his 'bad faith' in the creation of



Meursault as hero in the character of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the lawyer for a ‘now anonymous Meursault’ in *La Chute* (89). He considers the relationship between these two novels in terms of an ‘existential conversion’ (91). Of Camus’s ‘conversion’ he asserts that

[a]s long as the egoistical Manicheism [Meursault good/society bad] that produced *L’Étranger* held its sway over him, the author could not perceive the structural flaw of his novel. All illusions are one. They stand together and they fall together as soon as their cause, egotistical passion, is perceived. The confession of Clamence does not lead to a new interpretation of *L’Étranger* but to an act of transcendence; the perspective of this first novel is rejected. (91)

I will address what he refers to as the structural flaw in *L’Étranger* below. Of this interpretation I will simply say that it appears to contain a contradiction. If Camus’s novels, the first and the ‘confessional,’ are both primarily personal projects, his works remain egoistic, purely and simply.

### iii. *The historical approach*

Two methods appear to be used in the historical approach to *L’Étranger*, those of literary and historical criticism. For example, and very broadly speaking, in *A Pagan Hero*, Champigny tends to read *L’Étranger* as a literary-historical critique of the Western culture. He defines his terms quite precisely. He states that “by pagan I mean non-romantic and non-Christian.”<sup>47</sup> According to Champigny, Meursault

is wise, in a common connotation of the word. He may be occasionally “bored,” but he is not troubled by romantic ennui. His boredom is finite and determinate, in contrast to an infinite, all-embracing romantic ennui. (7)

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Champigny, *A Pagan Hero*, trans. Rowe Portis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 25. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Champigny.

On his view, *L'Étranger* is a story about a pagan living in a 'theatrical and religious society,' that is, in a 'society which represents *antiphysis*' (16). He distinguishes this culture from that of the pagan wherein "facts and things are placed in the framework not of theatre but of nature" (34). Still, in spite of being a stranger,

Meursault does not feel estranged from society any more than from reality. Here again, he feels at home. Rebellion, disgust, contempt, indignation, and hate do not torment him. His position is well established, a humble one which contents him.... He knows, and accepts, the conventions governing his day-by-day relations with other people. (7)

Of the interpretations I have read of *L'Étranger*, I am most sympathetic to Robert Champigny's. He reads it as an account of a pagan living in Christian times, or at least of a pagan living in a culture shaped by Christian times now reduced to hardened law – court, public opinion and Christian. For a while Meursault goes under. While undergoing the ministrations of court, public opinion and Christian, he imperceptibly begins to lose himself in their story, slowly forgetting his own. What he all but forgets, he remembers at the end of the story. He remembers life, all the while knowing he will die. He is condemned, knows almost the hour, but refuses to refuse life. The stranger remembers the stake and renews the wager. He knows full well he will lose. Still he refuses to console himself, that is, he refuses to lie. Champigny's account is basically this, I think. He reads the story as a literary critique of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western culture, quite literally.

O'Brien, on the other hand, attends to the historical reception of *L'Étranger*. He argues, as do I, that the various interpretations of the novel, for example, the existentialist, reflects the interests or needs of the time in which it is read. I suggest that

insofar as O'Brien personally approaches *L'Étranger* from a post-colonial perspective<sup>48</sup> in his text *Camus*, his interpretation neatly echoes his position.

According to O'Brien, when the novel is taken literally there are holes that cannot be filled. For instance, and as noted earlier, he contends that the existentialist view, which basically sees 'Meursault as a hero and martyr for the truth,' is undermined by the fact that Meursault lies. Again, he writes a spurious letter and bears false witness on behalf of his mate, Raymond. O'Brien does agree with Camus's assertion that Meursault does not lie about his feelings. However, he interprets this in terms of a 'Nietzschean integrity.' Like an artist, Meursault's interest is in his feelings, in the truth of them. It is here that O'Brien overlaps the psychoanalytic approach, asserting a coincidence between Camus the writer and Meursault the character. In this regard, he asserts that

just as Meursault is scrupulous in regard to his own feelings and indifferent to the society around him, so Camus is rigorous in his treatment of the psychology of Meursault... and lax in his presentation of the society which condemns Meursault to death. (22)

To sustain this position, O'Brien brings to bear his own perspective on the court scene. He argues that in the colonial reality of French Algeria at the time Camus was writing, Meursault would have been acquitted. The public's fear of an Arab with a knife would have been played to in a real court of law and thus Meursault would have been exonerated (22-3). On his view, then, Meursault is not convicted for not crying at his

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<sup>48</sup> Regarding this framing of Camus's thought, see David Carroll's nuanced treatment in his text *Albert Camus the Algerian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). He asserts that the interpretations of Camus's position on Algeria range from those who see him as a colonialist, such as O'Brien, to those who consider him to be anti-colonial, such as Michael Walzer. In this regard, Carroll regards O'Brien as being "one of the earliest and harshest of Camus' postcolonial critics." (11)

mother's funeral. Rather, Camus's presentation of the court is 'deluded' as he presents the Arab and Meursault as equals in the eyes of the law. As such, the novel

implicitly denies the colonial reality and sustains the colonial fiction. The impression of radical rejection and revolt which so many readers have received from the novel is therefore deceptive, because, concealed near its heart, there lies the specific social fiction vital to the *status quo* in the place where the novel is set. (23)

In brief, O'Brien dismisses the notion that *L'Étranger* is representative of the 'literature of revolt.' He asks of Camus's works during this period, and thus of *L'Étranger*,

[a]gainst what is the revolt? There is certainly a rejection of the Christian cosmogony and of the supernatural generally, but this is in no sense a revolt against the values of Camus's culture: it is an acceptance of the word which Nietzsche long before had spread. A metaphysical revolt against a cosmos without God, a revolt taking the form of a decision to continue to live, seems to lack substance. (31)

In way of summary, he asserts that

[t]he real significance, and the source of appeal, of the work of this period is not one of revolt but of affirmation. To a generation which saw no reason for hope it offered hope without reason. It offered a category – the absurd – in which logical, psychological, philosophical and even social and political difficulties could be encapsulated and it allowed the joy of being alive, in the presence of death, to emerge. It was neither a revolutionary message nor a specifically moral one; but it was a singularly sweet and exhilarating message to a whole generation who were also pleased to think of it as revolutionary and moral. I belonged to that generation and if I scrutinize that message now with the wary eyes of middle age, I am no less grateful for having received it in my youth. (32)

I end this section with O'Brien's interpretation as it effectively runs together the three broad approaches to *L'Étranger* – the existential, psychoanalytic and historical, largely dismissing each in turn in light of a more recent perspective, that of post-colonialism, historically speaking.

I suggest that these approaches are not entirely separable. Each emphasizes various aspects of the novel and thus each is an echo of *L'Étranger*. As with all echoes,

though, each is like and unlike the original. Any novel of note bears multiple interpretations, while simultaneously eluding all of them. A novel acts like a mirror, in fact, in which we see our interests and needs reflected. From the time of its publication in 1942 through to the end of the countercultural 1960s, the existentialist interpretation was dominant. During this period, the West was busy rebuilding itself after the carnage of the wars. Moving into the 1970s and forward, the psychoanalytic approach was brought to bear on both Meursault and Camus. Part of the task of psychoanalysis, of course, is to release us from our shadows – both the real and the imagined. Finally, the post-colonial interpretation appears to point to one of the shadows of the West.

It need be noted that at present there is an interest in ‘the body’ in Western thought, both in and outside of academia. In a notebook entry written sometime between November 1945 and October 1946, Camus asserts that

[a]fter two thousand years of Christianity, the revolt of the body. It has taken two thousand years for us once again to be able to show it naked on the beaches. Hence the excess. And it has recovered its place in our customs. What we now have to do is to restore its place in philosophy and metaphysics. This is one of the meanings of the modern convulsion. (NB/42: 84)

I suggest this is the task he undertook across the body of his works, that is, his work concerns the recovery of the body. However, and almost quoting Camus, “you must ask yourself in what way” (118). What follows is a story about a story, then.

*A structural analysis – Flaw or literal image?*

I will begin this section with Girard’s comments concerning the structural flaw he perceives in *L’Étranger*. Recall that he sees a “contradiction between the first and second Meursault, between the peaceful solipsist and the martyr of society” (87). This flaw, he

says, is masked by Camus's narrative technique. He also cites the lack of 'rhetorical ornaments' in style and the fact that Camus does not indulge in the 'affectation of vulgarity and profanity' of writers a generation before who tried to 'destroy rhetoric.' Of more interest, however, is his statement regarding Camus's choice of tense. He declaims that the

famous rejection of the preterite – or of the present – the two tenses of formal narration, for the *passé composé* that is a conversational tense, amounts to an abandonment of all approved techniques of story telling. The author refuses to be a *raconteur* who performs for an audience. His *écriture blanche* gives an effect of grayish monotony that is the next best thing to silence, and silence is the only conduct truly befitting a solipsist, the only one, however, that he cannot bring himself to adopt. (99)

As Camus does write, Girard asserts that he is only 'a half-committed solipsist.' However, Camus needs to speak without giving away the game. He thus masks his intention with his narrative technique, above all to himself on this interpretation. This of course renders Camus's style opaque to himself, though Girard sees through it to the solipsist who could not himself see what he was doing. This argument is circular in a vicious sense: 'Camus's style is that of a solipsist. As he writes, he is only a half-committed solipsist. Confer his style.' This argument does not point beyond itself. It is finished thought. Is Camus indicted because he has not chosen an approved technique of story telling or because he refuses to 'perform for an audience'? The question needs to be asked as clearly Girard pillories him for adopting a conversational tense.

It is in this regard that Girard most closely assimilates Meursault's character to that of Camus. Of this reduction of the creature to the creator, he writes that

Camus betrays solipsism when he writes *L'Étranger* just as Meursault betrays it when he murders the Arab. The close analogy between the murder of the Arab and the style

of the novel is not difficult to explain; every aspect of the work bears the imprint of a single creative act that stands in the same relation to its own consequence, the book, as Meursault's behavior to his murder. *The "innocent murder" is really the image and the crux of the whole creative process.* (99; italics mine)

As I have noted, Camus is a consummate artist and an accomplished disciple of Nietzsche. Hence, one must consider the relation of the form and content of *L'Étranger*, as with each of his works, not merely the man and his creation. Each work is discrete but is best understood in relation to the others. Camus is a man, thinker and artist whose works are performative, I suggest, rather than performance. Thus, for Camus and for the reader it is an undergoing.

It should also be noted here that Camus was inordinately disciplined when he wrote. Indeed, while working he was ascetic in the ordinary sense of *askēsis*. In the Greek practice, *askēsis* is a discipline of body and mind, a Spartan regime originally, not Christian. What Camus thinks is not 'spoken about' in his philosophical essays. Rather, he speaks while writing. It is thus a performative act, not performance. Performance presupposes the 'audience' before whom one performs. Camus assumes nothing about the reader. He is present in his words as he takes the distance proper to a conversation rather than the distance of some novelists, philosophers – or analysts. He remains present as he works and his presence in his words results from this discipline of mind and body. For Camus, it concerns the maintenance of the distance required to listen properly, as in a genuine conversation one listens even as one speaks. His work is conversational, then, that is, he invites us to a conversation. He does not pontificate in his novels. They are not spoiled by didacticism or self-consciousness as with many 'philosophers who also write novels,' as, for example, Sartre and, on the whole, Iris Murdoch. Camus writes in the

style that presents itself as the thoughts form. Form and content, art and thought, image and idea are seamless in Camus's work. His work is one of literal imaging.

But back to Girard's interpretation. Prior to Camus's 'existential conversion,' then, he personally requires this innocent murder in order to establish that the judges are always wrong. Girard says of this need that "[a]s long as the egoistical Manicheism that produced *L'Étranger* held its sway over him, the author could not perceive the structural flaw of his novel" (91). Thus, through a sleight of hand, namely, the "skillful narrative technique [which] makes it very difficult to perceive the logical flaw in the structure of the novel" (87), Camus renders the flaw obscure, though again primarily to himself it seems. Girard dismisses what he interprets as a contradiction between the first and second Meursault as the psychological fault of the craftsman, whom he thereby dismisses as well in fact.

I believe the contradiction as perceived by Girard is a shadow. His theory rests on the premise that Meursault is transformed into a martyr of society. This notion of Meursault as a social martyr results primarily from the existentialist reading of *L'Étranger*. Recall that Camus disavowed all association with this 'school.' Indeed, he disavowed identification with any school, be it of the absurd or any other. Unlike the existentialists – both the religious and secular, he sees the absurd as a starting point not an end. The religious take the absurd as God or as pointing toward God, thereby reinvoking Augustinism. The secularists, for example Sartre, take the absurd as a metaphysical principle, that is, as the primacy of 'the nothing.' Again, Camus succinctly states that the religious and secularist approaches lead to the same preaching – both



groups of thinkers leap and thus each group ends in nihilism. Camus is neither a religious nor a secular thinker. These locutions are dependent upon each other for their frame of reference. Camus, ‘that other African,’ stands apart from this internal disjunct. He is aware of it but it is not his by birthright.

In a proper conversation, a certain distance is maintained between those speaking, as between lovers. It is the space required for listening. I suggest Camus tries to maintain this distance with all thinkers and thus his refusal of a school. If we are to take Camus seriously, that is, if we try to listen to his words and allow them the weight we would allow any partner in a conversation, or at least ought to, we have to attend to what he says before applying a ‘theory.’ Apropos of this, it is interesting to note that Girard writes, “Camus criticized writers and thinkers naïve enough to believe in communication” (99). But what is theory but hardened communication?

In his 1955 Afterword to *The Outsider*, Camus writes, “I tried to make my character represent the only Christ that we deserve” (119). Almost quoting Camus again, ‘you must ask yourself in what way.’ It is readily understood to intend that Meursault is, like Christ, a martyr for the truth. Certainly this supports the existentialist interpretation of Meursault as the one who dies because he does not play the game, that is, who refuses to lie. And, of course, a martyr’s death is generally understood to be in some sense a redemptive act, the witnessing of truth, for example. But Meursault does lie. It also needs to be asked if Camus see Meursault’s death as redemptive. More precisely, it needs to be asked if Camus sees death as redemptive or simply as a complete end which redeems nothing at all. Recall Camus’s comment about the death of a dictatorial grandmother in

the first of his lyrical essays, “Irony.” Camus says quite simply that it is “a death that redeems nothing.... Death for us all, but his own death to each” (LCE 29). If this is a redemptive notion of death, it is strange redemption, indeed – redemption without resumption. If Meursault is martyred, to what is he martyred?

As I began this section with Girard, I will almost conclude with him as well. In effect, Girard attributes the structural flaw to the all but self-blinding of Camus. He asserts that this “urge to escape solitude was stronger than the self-destructive dynamism of repressed pride. But this urge had to prevail in an underhanded fashion. Camus could not contradict himself too openly” (98). Thus, the structural flaw is a mirror image of the character flaw Camus suffered prior to his ‘conversion,’ as the flaw, the innocent murder, ‘is really the image and the crux of the whole creative process.’ Apropos of this, in an early to mid-year entry in 1942, Camus writes in his notebook that “[i]n the psychoanalyst’s view, the ego is constantly putting on a show for itself, but the libretto is false” (NB/42: 8).

#### *Askēsis – An absurd logic*

What is a ‘contradiction’? Stated simply, it consists in two things which cannot be brought together. A space, a gap is exposed between facts; between ideas; between facts and ideas; or in character. The logic of either/or, founded on the principle of non-contradiction, requires resolution as on this logic one either makes a choice between or each negates the other. This logic, which undergirds the thinking of the West, is dualistic – either this or that but not both. To contradict, from the Latin, *contradict-*, *contradicere*, means to ‘speak against.’ In living reality this logic translates as, ‘you are with me or

against me.’ Either one speaks against or with and thus one must choose. Again, one makes a choice between or each negates the other. In living reality, this logic translates into quiet daily violence or outright war. It demands the resolution of all contradiction, a closing of the gap, rather than the maintenance of it. In this logic, winner takes all.

At stake in an absurd reasoning is a logic radically different from that of the classical dialectic or the equivalency of triumphant and humiliated reason. In an absurd logic, contradiction is understood in terms of paradox. A paradox, from the Greek *paradoxon*, means ‘contrary (opinion)’. This logic recognizes that the tension is not to be overcome. Rather, it is to be maintained. One must continuously return to the middle, to a balance such that contraries are held together in a tension, neither the suppression of one nor the supplanting of the other. This results from an *askēsis* of desire. In this logic, contrary opinion is recognized and maintained. In living reality, and on this view of logic, the most one can say is, have a look. Decide for yourself. One’s opinion or desire need not eliminate or overcome that of the other. It is, rather, an invitation to dialogue.

I believe the conversational style, consciously adopted by Camus, mirrors this logic rather than the Manichean logic of either/or as Girard reads it. A genuine conversation consists in speech and silence. Silence is the space or gap of listening. Perhaps the silence excoriated by Girard is not that of a solipsist, then, but that of a conversationalist. Again, if we are to take Camus seriously, we need to try to listen to his words and allow them the weight we would allow any conversation partner, or ought to. With Girard, I see a contradiction in *L’Étranger*, or better, a gap. However, in my view, the contradiction – the space, the gap – is intentional. Indeed, Camus insists on it

stylistically with his silence. What is the gap? And what point might Camus be making by insisting upon it?

Unlike Girard, I see little change in Meursault's character between Parts 1 and 2 of *L'Étranger*. The continuity in character is most clearly evidenced by a comparison between Meursault's response to the murder at the end of Part 1 and to the magistrate who questions him at the beginning of Part 2. Immediately following the murder on the hot mid-afternoon Algerian beach, Meursault states very simply that

[t]he trigger gave, I felt the underside of the polished butt and it was there, in that sharp but deafening noise, that it all started. I shook off the sweat and the sun. I realized that I'd destroyed the balance of the day and the perfect silence of this beach where I'd been happy. And I fired four more times at a lifeless body and the bullets sank in without leaving a mark. And it was like giving four sharp knocks at the door of unhappiness. (59)

Thus ends Part 1. The beginning of Part 2 opens with the examining magistrate asking if Meursault had chosen a lawyer. Meursault responds with,

I confessed that I hadn't and inquired as to whether it was absolutely necessary to have one. 'Why do you ask?' he said. I replied that I thought my case was very simple. He smiled and said, 'That's your opinion. But this is the law.' (63)

For Meursault, it seems the facts are clear. He has killed a man and thus will assume responsibility for it. He has 'destroyed the balance of the day,' that is, he has overstepped limits for which he is willing to accept punishment. The case for him remains a simple fact, unlike for the law, that is, for the court, public and Christian.

The difficulty this novel presents, performatively, is that of interpretation. In *Le Mythe*, Camus writes,

[t]he whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to re-read. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified, require that the story be reread from another

point of view. Sometimes there is a double possibility of interpretation, whence appears the necessity for two readings. This is what the author wanted. (112)

This quote opens Lazere's chapter on *L'Étranger*. Of it, he neatly states that

[t]his is what Camus too wanted in his art and achieved preeminently in *L'Étranger*. He says in a notebook entry on it in 1942, 'Conclusion: society needs people who weep at their mother's funeral; or else one is never condemned for the crime one thinks. Moreover, I see ten other possible conclusions.' (Lazere 151)

What is the function of any interpretation? It fills a gap which is instated between the writer and reader by the text itself. Something is said which requires interpretation in order to be grasped. This gap creates the need for interpretation as we quite naturally have a desire to understand what is before us, even if our efforts are continuously thwarted.

In a February 1942 notebook entry, Camus writes that "[t]he whole problem of the absurd ought to be reducible to a critique of fact and value judgments" (NB/42: 19). By 'value judgment' I understand interpretation. Facts are what they are. Meursault commits a murder. How one interprets or judges such an act, for example as an act of passion or as premeditated, is altogether another matter. In light of this, I suggest that Camus inscribes and insists upon what is perceived by Girard as a structural flaw. Again, he asserts that Camus needs to 'hide' the contradiction between the 'first and second Meursault,' which in itself is required to support the 'innocent murder.' I suggest, rather, that what Camus inscribes and insists upon is the gap between fact and interpretation.

In *L'Étranger* there is a disjunct between writer and reader; creator and creation; and between characters. Indeed, this latter disjunct is referred to by characters in Part 2 of the novel. For instance, when Raymond takes the stand to witness on behalf of

Meursault, he immediately states that Meursault 'is innocent'. The judge silences him, announcing "that he wasn't being asked for value judgments but for facts" (91). Perhaps as Raymond was testifying, he was witnessing to his having inadvertently embroiled Meursault in his affairs and, quite simply, things happened. These are facts which the judge refuses to hear because he does not recognize them. Immediately afterward, the prosecutor claims Raymond is an 'immoral monster' as he is a pimp, thereby tarring Raymond and by association, Meursault. Meursault notes that when the owner of the café, Celeste, took the stand and was asked what he thinks of him, Celeste "replied that I was a man of the world; and what he understood by that and he announced that everyone knew what that meant" (89). As to the crime, Celeste states that

'I think it was a mishap. A mishap, everyone knows what that is. You can't guard against that. So there you are! I think it was a mishap.'... And the judge said, 'Yes, all right. But we are here to judge such mishaps.' (89)

There appears to be a disjunct between those with whom Meursault associates and the court before which he is being tried. What constitutes 'facts' is not understood in the same way. The gap between the characters appears clearly here. Meursault and friends and the law – court, public and Christian – are strangers to each other. Finally, the gap between fact and judgment is stated succinctly by Meursault's lawyer who says, "the epitome of this trial [is that] [e]verything is true and yet nothing is true" (88). The facts are what they are. Interpretation or value judgment can make facts entirely unlike themselves.

It is precisely this disjunct between fact and value judgment that is at stake in terms of both the form and content of the novel. If Camus practices a sleight of hand, it is

to obscure this disjunct by inducing an emphasis, in the characters and in readers of the novel, on the fact that Meursault does not cry at his mother's funeral. This latter is a fact. How it is to be interpreted is the question. The prosecutor declares that

only someone as naïve as the honourable counsel for the defence could fail to appreciate that between two such actions [burying his mother and killing a man] there existed a profound, tragic and vital relationship. 'Yes, he exclaimed vehemently, 'I accuse this man of burying his mother like a heartless criminal.' (93)

With this sleight of hand, both the characters and the readers of *L'Étranger* are forced to decide to make the leap from the facts to a judgment of them, like that of the prosecutor, or to remain stymied. The 'mishap' is incomprehensible, in fact. At a point, Meursault says it was 'because of the sun,' the intolerably high, hot sun on the Algerian beach. Champigny states that Meursault cites a cause not a motive, that he "wished only to remove an obstacle from the road to the spring [directly behind the Arab], perhaps not even that" (Champigny, 53, 55). While Champigny hedges, he may go too far even with this. This hedge, however, neatly highlights that it is explanation where perhaps there is really none at all. Meursault himself states that it was by chance that he had a gun in his hand, an accident that he killed a man. Is this enough for the other characters and readers, as it appears to be for Meursault who was there? Perhaps *L'Étranger* is an object lesson in being stymied. Sometimes things simply happen for which, nevertheless, we must take responsibility.

The fact being interpreted is not as interesting, ultimately, as the fact that there is a disjunct – a gap – which demands to be interpreted. In terms of content, the first half of the book merely states facts without any judgment whatsoever. The second half of the book, the investigation and trial, concerns trying to interpret or to make sense of the facts

noted by Meursault in the first half. The novel itself, then, structurally takes the shape of this very disjunct of fact and value judgment, that is, of fact and our need to understand, to interpret. I suggest the gap itself is an artistic rendering of the absurd. Things happen. Facts stand over and against us that we want to understand, need to understand. The novel is, in short, a literal image of the philosophy of the absurd. Is it, then, a nihilistic novel as is often said of it? Has Camus not moved beyond the absurd after all? I suggest that this book neither begins nor ends in nihilism, as will be considered below. First I need to conclude the argument concerning the crafted gap between fact and value judgment.

Content-wise, I suggest that the literal gap in *L'Étranger* is the pause between the fatal first shot and last four into the inert body. This actual pause is mirrored in the gap of fact and judgment – Meursault's murder of the Arab and its interpretation by the law. I believe this position is supported most clearly by the examining magistrate's interest in Meursault's case. I will quote extensively here as I believe this exchange witnesses to the heart of the issue. Almost immediately after the first examination begins, Meursault notes that the magistrate

stopped talking and looked at me, then sat up rather suddenly and said very quickly, 'What interests me is you.' I didn't quite understand what he meant by that and I didn't say anything. 'There are certain things,' he added, 'that puzzle me in what you did. I'm sure you'll help me to understand them.' I told him that it was all very simple. He urged me to go over the day again. (66)

Meursault complies, though he is tired of speaking. There is a pause, after which the magistrate tells Meursault he wants to help him,

but first, he wanted to ask me a few more questions. In the same breath, he asked me if I loved my mother. I said, 'Yes, like everyone else....' Still without any apparent



logic, the magistrate then asked me if I'd fired all five shots at once. I thought it over and specified that I'd only fired once to start with and then, a few seconds later, the other four shots. 'Why did you pause between the first and second shot?' he said. Once again I saw the red beach in front of me and felt the burning sun on my forehead. But this time I didn't answer. Throughout the silence which followed, the magistrate looked flustered. He sat down, ran his fingers through his hair, put his elbows on his desk and leaned slightly towards me with a strange expression on his face. 'Why, why did you fire at a dead body?' Once again I didn't know what to answer. The magistrate wiped his hands across his forehead and repeated his question in a slightly broken voice, 'Why?' You must tell me. Why?' (66-67)

The magistrate then retrieves and brandishes a crucifix, asking Meursault if he believes in God and telling him God will forgive him if he confesses all. Meursault, somewhat disturbed by the magistrate's vehemence notes that

he frightened me a bit. I realized at the same time that this was ridiculous because, after all, I was the criminal. But he carried on. I vaguely understood that as far as he was concerned there was only one part of my confession that didn't make sense, the fact that I'd paused before firing my second shot. The rest was all right, but this he just couldn't understand. (68)

The magistrate again asks Meursault if he believes in God, to which Meursault again responds negatively. Meursault then notes that

he told me that it was impossible, that all men believe in God, even those who wouldn't face up to Him. That was his belief, and if he should ever doubt it, his life would become meaningless. 'Do you want my life to be meaningless?' he cried. As far as I was concerned, it had nothing to do with me and I told him so. (68)

At subsequent meetings, Meursault notes that "it seemed as if the magistrate had lost in interest in me and had somehow classified my case. He didn't talk to me about God any more and I never saw him again in such a frenzy as on that first day" (69).

What is at stake in this exchange between the magistrate and Meursault? Many of the elements that play in the history of the interpretation of this novel are present: the sun; Meursault's simple honesty; the question concerning Meursault's mother; and the

law (court, public and Christian) as represented in and by the magistrate. What is at stake? A pagan worldview as opposed to a Christian? An authentic individual over and against a theatrical society? Or does the magistrate evidence a need deeper than the one he expresses – that all must believe in God in order that he can continue to hold this belief? I suggest it is fundamentally the sense-making function of ‘God’ that is at stake for the magistrate, not his stated belief. The ‘consolation’ of the leap is at stake, regardless of the particular consolation, as the gap is present.

The content of the novel supports the pagan/Christian analysis of Champigny. So too does the historical-cultural reality within which this novel was written. However, the structure drives the novel deeper than the content. The gap – the absurd – is present in all its nakedness on the structural level of *L'Étranger*. What the gap is filled with is indifferent ultimately. Indeed, when Meursault is convicted and sentenced to death by the French court, he notes, amongst other random factors, “that it had been credited to so vague an entity as the French (or German, or Chinese) people” (105). Quoting Camus, ‘I see ten other possible conclusions.’ What or who fills the gap, a religion, a people, reason, is indifferent. The experience of the absurd is perennial. It is a human possibility. Consolations come and go, however.

It is time to reflect on Meursault’s side of the experience, which initially is anything but that of the absurd. Remember – the story is told from his point of view. Again, unlike the magistrate as representative of the law (court, public and Christian), Meursault appears to have little difficulty accepting that sometimes things simply happen. Accidents occur – ‘you can’t guard against that’ as Celeste says. They cannot be

explained, classified, put away. Rather, they must be acknowledged, taken up and left behind. This attitude is indicated in Meursault's understanding of the murder. For him, it is very simple – he has overstepped limits and is thus willing to be punished for it. His attitude is remarkably lucid. There appears to be no experience of the absurd on his side. There is, however, for the magistrate who invokes 'the law' which requires that everything be explained, classified and only then put away. Unlike Meursault, the law requires a 'heartless criminal' or a 'repentant sinner.'

Meursault is asked by both the magistrate and the chaplain if he feels regret. In his closing statement, the prosecutor claims that "not once in front of the examining magistrate did [Meursault] show any emotion with regard to his abominable crime" (97). Meursault states that,

I couldn't help admitting that he was right. I didn't much regret what I'd done. But I was surprised that he was so furious about it. I'd have liked to have explained to him in a friendly way, almost affectionately, that I'd never really been able to regret anything. I was always preoccupied by what was about to happen, today or tomorrow. (97)

Once again, 'you must ask yourself in what way' this lack of regret is to be understood. The Old French verb *regretter* means to 'bewail the dead.' Beginning with Middle French, it eventually takes on the meaning of 'dissatisfaction with the self or to feel guilty.'<sup>49</sup> As with the English word 'regret,' then, it means 'to be sorry for' or 'to repent.' Arguably, this term is intimately linked with the Christian culture. And it marks the post-Christian culture of the West as well, as this culture still bears most of the attitudes which attended Christianity at its inception, however transformed. Repenting, I feel guilt about

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<sup>49</sup> *Dictionnaire historique de la langue Française*, ed. Alain Rey (Paris: Dictionnaires le Robert, 1992). The first date for this modern French usage is 1680.

something from the past, a paying of dues of sorts. However, am I not surreptitiously refusing my original act with this consequent act of repentance? 'I suffer guilt for what I have done.' My 'suffering' acts almost as a perverse exoneration after the fact. On this view, regret is understood as a means by which I make myself feel that I am better than I was. Or as Camus writes in a later text, in decrees of (absolute) guilt and innocence,

one can discern the taste for comfort or the desire to escape contradiction and to preserve to some extent one's innocence. This is especially true of those who indulge in the morose delights of an absolute guilt that, in the final analysis, best dispenses with individual responsibility.<sup>50</sup>

Taking responsibility for what one has done is one thing. Again, Meursault appears to be quite at peace about being punished for the murder. Recall that he does not think there is a need for a lawyer as he feels his 'case is very simple.' But regret, repentance and guilt are of another order altogether. It is in this manner that I understand Meursault's lack of regret. The magistrate, court and public bear vestiges of the Christian experience. Not so Meursault. He is a stranger to it. It is not his by birthright. Thus, while he accepts the verdict of the court, that he is responsible for having killed a man, he does not feel 'sinful' or 'repentant' as the court also seems to require of him. With Champigny, it appears that at stake content-wise is a meeting of different cultures and sensibilities. Of interest is the experience of the absurd in this meeting on the part of both sides, however different it may be. Now we can consider Meursault's side.

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<sup>50</sup> Albert Camus, "In Defense of *The Rebel*," in *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation*, ed. and trans. David A. Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), 209.

He appears to see and experience quite differently from the culture in which he lives. For example, when offered the opportunity to move to the head office in Paris, he declines, which surprises his boss. Meursault says of this encounter that

[h]e then asked me if I wasn't interested in changing my life. I replied that you could never change your life, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine here. He looked upset and told me that I always evaded the question and that I had no ambition, which was disastrous in the business world. So I went back to work. I'd rather not have upset him, but I couldn't see any reason for changing my life. Come to think of it, I wasn't unhappy. When I was a student, I had plenty of that sort of ambition. But when I had to give up my studies, I very soon realized that none of it really mattered. (44)

Is this a type of consolation for a 'failed' life? Or is it expressive of a particular understanding of existence? This attitude, that one can never change one's life, helps illuminate his lack of regret. Why regret what cannot be changed? Perhaps it is reflective of Meursault's understanding of life, then, not merely consolation for the lack of a higher clerk's position or a surreptitious refusal of his act.

His attitude is fleshed out further in his response to Marie's asking him to marry her. Meursault said to her that

I didn't mind and we could do it if she wanted to. She then wanted to know if I loved her. I replied as I had done once already, that it didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't. 'Why marry me then?' she said. I explained to her that it really didn't matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. Anyway, she was the one who was asking me and I was simply saying yes. She then remarked that marriage was a serious matter. I said, 'No.' (44)

What is serious for Meursault? This comes into focus in the second part of the novel.

While in prison awaiting his trial, Meursault looks at himself in his tin dinner plate. He states that "my reflection seemed to stay serious even when I tried to smile at it" (79). He checks it again later in the skylight in his cell, noting 'it was still serious.' He

says there is nothing surprising about this as ‘at that point he was serious too.’ Yet the need to double check his reflection suggests a disquiet of sorts with what he saw. Generally speaking, what we take seriously is expressive of what we value. His disquiet with the seriousness of his visage is interesting, then. It appears he recognizes that he is undergoing some sort of distortion of what he values. I believe this is the signal event indicating the slow erosion of Meursault’s sense of self and of the onset of the experience of the absurd on his side. In the second part of the novel, there are small but significant shifts in his character. I suggest these distortions of character indicate the opening of a gap within Meursault, as slowly the stranger becomes an outsider to himself. I will briefly list some of the shifts prior to commenting further on the import of this movement.

The first instance occurs immediately after the case is lost, when a colleague congratulates Meursault’s lawyer on his valiant effort. Meursault notes that “[o]ne of them even called me to witness. ‘Eh?’ he said. I agreed, but it was hardly a sincere compliment, because I was too tired” (101). Typically, if Meursault is tired he simply refuses to speak. For the first time in the novel, he says “more than is true... and more than [he] feels” (118).

His sense of belonging to the world also slowly begins to disintegrate. At the beginning of Meursault’s prison term, he hangs from the barred window of his cell to watch the sky. After the court case, he thinks only about ‘the dawn,’ that is, the morning the officials will arrive to lead him to the guillotine, and about his appeal. He says,

*I’d stretch out and look at the sky and force myself to take an interest in it. It would turn green and I’d know it was evening. I’d make another effort to divert my thoughts.*

I'd listen to my heart. I couldn't imagine that this noise which had been with me for so long could ever stop. I've never really had much imagination. And yet I'd try to envisage a particular moment when the beating of my heart would no longer be going on inside my head. But in vain. Either the dawn or my appeal would still be there. And I'd end up telling myself that the most rational thing was not to hold myself back. (108; italics mine)

This passage is of interest for a couple of reasons. First, the sky which he loves no longer comes to him naturally. There is a new noise in his head – thoughts of the dawn and of his appeal. The old noise was literally that of his heart. Typically, 'listening to my heart' is understood metaphorically. Clearly this is not the case for Meursault. It appears that he has always lived without such abstractions – that is, he lives concretely. Suddenly though, his head is full of a new noise and 'the most rational thing was not to hold himself back.'

Entertaining these thoughts of the dawn and his appeal, both shadows of the real, invariably leads to a movement within Meursault from resignation to delirious joy. He develops two scenarios which he plays constantly in his mind. In the first, his appeal is declined. He concludes, finally, that "[g]iven that you've got to die, it obviously doesn't matter exactly how or when... therefore, I had to accept that my appeal had been dismissed" (109-11). This is followed immediately by the second scenario in which he imagines a pardon. He notes of this scenario that he deliberately tempers the delirious joy in order that his resignation to the first scenario not seem as unlikely. He says of this movement, "When I'd managed it, I'd have gained an hour's respite. That was something anyway" (110). The echo of Camus's founding myth, that of Sisyphus's labour, is unmistakable here. Sisyphus too briefly rests at the top and bottom of the mountain before resuming his interminable movement.

The chaplain whom Meursault has refused three times enters his cell just after he arrives once again at an hour's respite. This is when the final movement of both Meursault and the novel occurs. Meursault has no wish to engage with the chaplain but the latter stays regardless. The chaplain, like the magistrate earlier, asks Meursault about his belief in God, stating that “[e]very man that I’ve known in your position has turned towards Him” (112). Meursault responds, “I remarked that that was up to them. It also proved that they could spare the time. As for me, I didn’t want anyone to help me and time was the very thing I didn’t have for taking an interest in what didn’t interest me” (112). The chaplain then asks, “Have you really no hope at all and do you live in the belief that you are to die outright?” “Yes” (112), says Meursault. As the chaplain continues in a similar vein, Meursault notes,

[a]ll I knew was that he was beginning to annoy me.... Without really following what he was saying, I heard him start asking me questions again. He was talking in an anxious and insistent voice. I realized that he was getting emotional and I listened more carefully. (112-113)

The chaplain speaks to him of human and divine justice and about sin. Meursault notes, “I told him I don’t know what a sin was. I’d simply been told that I was guilty. I was guilty and I was paying for it and there was nothing more that could be asked of me” (113). The chaplain says in response, “there is more that could be asked of you. And it may well be asked of you.’ ‘And what’s that?’ ‘You could be asked to see.’ ‘To see what?’” (113) The chaplain claims that Meursault, like other prisoners, will see “a divine face emerging from the darkness. It is that face which you are being asked to see.’ I woke up a bit” (113), says Meursault at this point. So begins the final movement – one of a recovery of himself.



Meursault again recalls what is serious for him – time. He notes that the chaplain asks him,

‘Do you really love this earth as much as that?’... I didn’t answer... I was about to tell him to go away and leave me alone when suddenly he had a sort of outburst and turned towards me exclaiming, ‘No, I can’t believe you. You must surely at some time have wished for another life.’ I replied that naturally I had. (114)

The chaplain then asks Meursault how he ‘imagined this other life.’ Meursault shouts at him,

‘One which would remind me of this life,’ and in the same breath I told him that I’d had enough. He started talking to me about God again, but I went up to him and made one last attempt to explain to him that I didn’t have much time left. I didn’t want to waste it on God. (114)

He also remembers what he has always known, but has forgotten while waiting.

Grabbing the cassock of the chaplain and shouting at him once again, he says that

I was sure of myself, sure of everything, surer than he was, sure of my life and sure of the death that was coming to me. Yes, that was all I had. But at least it was a truth which I had hold of just as it had hold of me. I’d been right, I was still right, I was always right. I’d lived in a certain way and I could just as well have lived in a different way. ... It was as if I’d been waiting all along for this very moment and for the early dawn when I’d be justified. Nothing, nothing mattered and I knew very well why. ... What did other people’s deaths or a mother’s love matter to me, what did his God or the lives people chose or the destinies they selected matter to me, when one and the same destiny was to select me and thousands of millions of other privileged people, who, like him, called themselves my brothers. *Didn’t he understand? Everyone was privileged. There were only privileged people.* The others too would be condemned one day. He too would be condemned. What did it matter if he was accused of murder and then executed for not crying at his mother’s funeral? Salamano’s dog was worth just as much as his wife. The little automatic woman was just as guilty as the Parisian woman Masson had married or as Marie who wanted me to marry her. (115-116; italics mine)

During this outburst, Meursault remembers the universe and his belonging to it. He claims that, “finding it so much like myself, in fact so fraternal, I realized that I’d been happy, and that I was still happy” (117). I noted earlier that the court does not appear to

understand ‘facts’ in the same way as those presented by, for instance, Raymond and Celeste, that is, by men of Meursault’s ilk. Are these men nihilists or do they merely express a different way of seeing and experiencing reality? Otherwise said, are they simply strangers?

We are all privileged, says Meursault. We are alive. Of course we will die, we are all guilty. Of what are we guilty? The best summary of this understanding of reality is a fragment of Anaximander’s, which I believe the end of *L’Étranger* echoes:

The origin of things is the *Apeiron* [boundless] .... It is necessary that things should perish into that from which they were born; for they pay one another penalty ... and compensation for their injustice ... according to the ordinance ... of Time. (Diels-Kranz , Anaximander 9)<sup>51</sup>

It is time that is serious for Camus. We live here, in this world, now. While there may be a life after life, this notion is beyond the human scale. Our responsibility, then, is to live now, not for a possible later. After all, we are all privileged by life and we pay for this privilege with our lives. On this view of existence, the end is not provisional. It is not the end that is of interest then, as in Christianity, but how we are to live here and now without the promise of eternity and all that entails.

*A provisional conclusion – On the impasse of an absurd logic*

*L’Étranger* is, I believe, a literal image of the absurd. The experience of it is mirrored in the structure of the book both in terms of form and content. Again, the facts of the first half are taken up in the second, and there they are interpreted in the first instance by ‘the law’ – court, public and Christian. And we see how these latter lose their

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<sup>51</sup> This translation of Anaximander’s fragment is found in Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Athanasios Moulakis, Vol. 15: *Order and History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 305-6.

bearings or reinforce them while undergoing the experience of the absurd. It is then Meursault's turn to undergo this experience, that is, to lose his 'setting' or bearings. Finally he affirms that his original sense of belonging to this universe is 'right.' On this view, the gap between Parts 1 and 2 is not a structural flaw but an aesthetic-philosophical gap. The image Camus creates, through the seamlessness of form and content, reflects the experience of the absurd from both sides. Thus an impasse is reached. As quoted toward the end of chapter one, Camus notes that "I see clearly that absurd thought (even in aesthetics) ends in an impasse, and the problem is, Can one live in an impasse?" (Todd 167)

While Meursault reaffirms his love of life, indeed affirms life as the only value, it is as yet an indeterminate or abstract notion (Sherman 80) from which a rule or ethics cannot be derived. He is willing to accept the responsibility for having overstepped the limit in murdering the Arab, but it appears that he has no way of establishing the limit as yet. Though Meursault arrives at happiness again in his recollection of the value of life, he ends in absolute solitude and thus remains a stranger.

Thus, in spite of this affirmation of life at the end of *L'Étranger*, by the close of his first cycle Camus has yet to find an answer to the question to which the experience and acceptance of existence as absurd gives rise. As noted earlier, he writes, "What interests me is knowing how we must behave, and more precisely, how to behave when one does not believe in God or reason" (Todd 408). Without a transcendent guarantee of value to ground a choice of action, be it God or Reason, one is confronted with the radical equivalency of all action. How to choose an action when a radical indifference is

felt toward any possible action? As important, what moves us to make a choice at all? Camus's concern with the practical takes on an immediate exigency in light of the war years, both personally and, for Camus, collectively.

In the 1946 lyrical essay entitled "Prometheus in the Underworld," Camus writes,

The year the war began, I was to board a ship and follow the voyage of ... [Odysseus.] At that time, even a young man without money could entertain the extravagant notion of crossing the sea in quest of sunlight. But I did what everyone else did at the time. I did not get on that ship. I took my place in the queue shuffling toward the open mouth of hell. Little by little we entered. At the first cry of murdered innocence, the door slammed shut behind us. We were in hell, and we have not left it since. For six long years we have been trying to come to terms with it. Now we glimpse the warm ghosts of fortunate islands only at the end of long, cold, sunless years that lie ahead. (LCE 139)

Coming to terms with the absurd, which is the heart of the long, cold sunless years of the war and its aftermath, requires that a code of behavior be found. This quest, which begins with the first cycle, marks Camus's second cluster as well.

To regenerate love in an absurd world is to regenerate the most burning and the most perishable of human feelings.... But no value judgment can be made between a love that endures (on this earth) and one that does not. A faithful love – *if it does not impoverish itself* – is one way for man to maintain in the highest manner the best part of himself. This is how faithfulness recovers its value. But this love lies outside anything eternal. It is the most human of feelings with all the implications of limits and delights that this word contains. This is why man realizes himself only through love, because it contains in brilliantly shining form the image of his futureless condition.

*Carnets 1942-1951*  
Camus

## **Section 2: *Myth of Prometheus***

### Chapter 3

#### *Part I: On the historical context – An introduction to the analytic work of 1943-1946*

Launched in April 1941 with notes toward his novel *La Peste*, which was published in 1947, this cycle was completed in 1951 with the publication of Camus's political essay *L'Homme révolté*. This period, as prolific as the former, also includes four plays; six lyrical essays eventually included in the collection, *L'Été* (1954); a series of four essays collectively entitled, "Lettres à un ami Allemand," the first appearing in July 1943, the last in July 1944; a philosophical essay, "Remarque sur la révolte" (1945), included in a collection of essays edited by Jean Grenier; and amongst other miscellaneous publications, his contributions as editor-in-chief and journalist to the French Resistance newspaper *Combat* from 1944-1947.

During this cycle, Camus was immersed in history and politics both in fact and in the majority of his works, including two of his plays. Alternatively, there is nothing apparently political in his first cluster of writings which is marked by an interest in the human condition. Again, *Le Mythe* considers the general climate or overriding sensibility that Camus felt defined his era and is thereby curiously decontextualized. He undertakes an analysis of the historical genesis of this metaphysic roughly 10 years later in *L'Homme révolté*.

As noted in chapter one, Camus claims that "a profound thought is in a constant state of becoming; it adopts the experience of a life and assumes its shape" (MS 103). In light of this comment, it is clear that the war in Europe and the form of Camus's involvement with it determines the shape of this second cluster of writings. Camus did

not view the war as having being inevitable. In an article of November 6, 1939, which he co-wrote for the *Soir-Républicain* with his colleague and friend, Pascal Pia, he states that “[w]e believe there is only one inevitability in history, the one we create. We believe that the war could have been avoided, and can still be ended to everyone’s satisfaction” (Todd 91). And in an entry of September 1939 or so, he writes that “[i]t would have been enough for the Treaty of Versailles to have been revised in time” (NB/35: 84). However, once the war had begun, Camus felt it his duty to take part. In 1939, he was debarred from active service with the regular army of Algeria due to tuberculosis. Trapped in France by the German Occupation forces, and after having recovered from a bout of tuberculosis in 1942, Camus joined the French Resistance movement Combat in that same year. In 1943, Combat, also the name of the underground publication of the resistance group, sent him to Paris where he worked “simultaneously as a reader for Gallimard.”<sup>52</sup> The man and the writer were thus simultaneously engaged by the war.

Camus notes at different points that he writes about contradictions which are first of all his and about his experiences. I will quote here at length a passage from a letter he wrote to *Libertaire* in May 1952 in response to a critique of *L’Homme révolté*, as it is almost a manifesto-like statement. Camus asserts that

all those for whom the problems raised in this text are not solely rhetorical, have understood that I was analyzing a contradiction which to begin with had been mine. The thoughts of which I speak have nourished me and I wanted to proceed in ridding them of that which I believe hinders their advance. I am not a philosopher, in fact, and I know how to speak only about that which I have lived. I have endured nihilism, contradiction, violence and the vertigo of destruction. But, at the same time, I have hailed the power of creation and the privilege of being alive. Nothing authorizes me to

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<sup>52</sup> Carol Petersen, *Albert Camus*, trans. Alexander Gode (New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co., 1969), 112.

judge from above the époque of which I am entirely a part. Being confounded with it, I judge it from the inside. But I maintain the right to say what I henceforth know about myself and others, on the sole condition that I take care not to add to the insupportable misery of the world, but only point out, in the obscure walls against which we grope, the places yet invisible where doors may open. Yes, I maintain the right to speak about that which I know, and I will speak about it. I am interested only in a renaissance.<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, all Camus's works are in some sense an undergoing as he speaks about only that which he has endured. A March 7, 1951 entry in his notebooks reads, "Completed the first version of *The Rebel*. This book brings to an end the first two cycles. Thirty-seven years old. And now, can creation be free?" (NB/42: 177) This rather cryptic entry is made clearer in a letter to Albert Maquet, a commentator on Camus, which was written in 1952. Camus states,

I advance with the same steps, it seems to me, as an artist and as a man. And this is not preconceived. It is a faith I have, in all humility, in my vocation.... My future books won't turn away from the problem of the hour. But I would like them to subjugate it rather than be subjugated by it. In other words, I dream of a freer creation, with the same contents.... Then I will know if I am a true artist.<sup>54</sup>

Camus expresses here the seamlessness he felt between the man, artist and thinker that he was. This experience of the self is quite distinct from the sense of oneself as a 'philosopher' or as an artist writing 'committed literature.' There was a great deal of talk about this latter ideological notion in the period during which *La Peste* was written, not least of all by Sartre. Instead, Camus describes himself as "an artist who creates myths on the scale of his passion and anguish" (NB/42: 167). In light of this, there is something

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<sup>53</sup> Albert Camus, "Révolte et romantisme" in *Actuelles II*. In *Œuvres complètes d'Albert Camus*, vol. 5 (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 231-35. This passage is found on pp. 234-35. The translation is mine. Hereafter referred to in the body of the paper as A/II. *Actuelles I*, also found in vol. 5, is referenced as A/I.

<sup>54</sup> Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1951-1959*, trans. Ryan Bloom (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 2008), 35. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as NB/51. [*Carnets 1951-1959*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989.]



decidedly confessional about his writings however ‘depersonalized’ they may be. This notion of ‘an undergoing’ informs my reading of all of Camus’s works. However, it is especially germane during this particular cycle as I believe for Camus revolt is, in the first instance, a movement which the individual undergoes rather than something he decides. I suggest that his signal insight during this period is that a movement of revolt occurs all but independently of the historical reality in which one finds oneself. Thus, as opposed to a movement of the will, which is central to the absurd man’s revolt, for the rebel, it is the movement of revolt itself that first moves the individual. While the form of the resistance one takes is shaped by character and circumstances, the fact of revolt itself is the discovery and honouring of a value which gives itself as opposed to a choice of action as it is usually understood. And it is in the recognition of this value that we are moved to act. This assertion should become clearer through the following analysis of revolt.

In the first chapter of this section, I will focus primarily on four pieces of Camus’s writing: the “Lettres à un ami Allemand;” his essay “Remarque sur la révolte;” a series consisting of eight *Combat* editorials written in November 1944, collectively entitled “Ni victimes ni bourreaux;” and the companion novel *La Peste*. I believe these texts lie at the heart of this cluster on revolt, or more precisely, on the movement of revolt. Initially I will treat them separately as each marks the progress in Camus’s understanding and articulation of what ultimately took 10 years to mature. In the second chapter of this section, I will consider Camus’s examination of how this signal insight works itself out historically, which he undertakes in *L’Homme révolté*.

*“Lettres à un ami Allemand”*

“Lettres à un ami Allemand” consists in a series of four polemical ‘letters’ published clandestinely over the course of a year. Again, the first was published in July 1943, the last in July 1944 just before the liberation of Paris in August. In a preface to a later edition of these letters, Camus states that they must be understood as ‘documents emerging from the struggle against violence,’ lest their polemical nature be misunderstood. He claims that he was writing about ‘free Europeans’ and ‘Nazis,’ not about all Frenchmen and Germans. More precisely, he notes that he was writing about ‘enemy attitudes,’ personified by the French and German nations.

Invaded by Germany in 1940, France fell quickly. The north of France, including Paris, was occupied by the Germans. In the south, a collaborationist government was established in Vichy under the leadership of Henri-Philippe Pétain, a First World War hero. Until the liberation of Paris, on August 20-25, 1944, when citizens and members of the resistance together took up arms, the only active resistance in France was that of the underground movement. These men and women were hunted by both the Germans and the Vichy regime. Thus the letters, writes Camus, were intended “to throw some light on the blind battle we were then waging and thereby to make our battle more effective.”<sup>55</sup>

Stylistically, the letters trace the movement of heart ‘the writer’ had to undergo in order to commit to armed resistance against the Germans as opposed to simply capitulating to the blind battle waged by Germany, that is, without succumbing to the

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<sup>55</sup> Albert Camus, “Letters to a German Friend,” in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, 3-32. This quote is found on p 4. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Letters.

same blind instinct against which he was forced to fight. Armed resistance, however, is violent. It entails the same mutilation of man as that perpetrated by the aggressor. How is resistance different from the aggression it resists if both issue in the same result? Otherwise said, the question which underlies these letters is, ‘is murder ever justified?’ The letters, then, are simultaneously an examination of the nature of violence and of revolt. In this first text of the second cycle, Camus asks the questions which will occupy him until its completion in 1951. And as he notes in his letter to Maquet, each question posed arises in light of the historical exigencies to which he was subjugated. The conclusions he reaches in response to these questions remain basically unchanged throughout this cycle. In large part then, the next few years are spent unpacking the implications of the insights he reaches from 1943-1944.

The themes are developed in a ‘letter’ written by a ‘Frenchman’ to his erstwhile ‘German friend,’ the two now having become enemies. I will only briefly summarize the gist of the first three letters as in these Camus largely recounts what the ‘Frenchmen’ had to overcome and reconcile within themselves in order justify their entry into battle. It is in the fourth letter that he expressly examines the justification for taking up arms, that is, for committing murder.

In the first letter, published in July 1943, the writer recalls a taunt of his friend in light of what the German took as France’s reluctance to enter the arena of war five years earlier. He thereby puts the Frenchman’s love of country in question. The writer responds by distinguishing the types of love each has for his country. The German loves his ‘fatherland’ blindly, subsuming all else, including man, to conquest in the name of

country. The Frenchman argues that if a love of justice is contrary to a love of country, then indeed he does not love his country. The delay was caused, therefore, by three factors. First, the French had to fight the desire to emulate the violence of Germany “as there is always something in us that yields to instinct, to contempt for intelligence, to the cult of efficiency” (7). Secondly, it was necessary to determine if right was on their side. Finally, there was the need to overcome a ‘weakness for mankind,’ that is, the hope for a peaceful destiny and the knowledge that ‘the mutilation of mankind is irrecoverable.’ In short, he writes that “it is a detour that regard for truth imposes on intelligence, that regard for friendship imposes on the heart” (8). Conversely, he notes that the Germans had nothing to overcome or reconcile as they had betrayed the heart, abandoned their intelligence to the rule of one man and serve only power.

It is important to note that by ‘reconcile’ Camus intends the maintenance of a contradiction, as for example, fighting a war one loathes while knowing that all one loves could be lost; and having simultaneously to recognize the possible destruction of oneself all the while knowing ‘that hatred and violence are empty things in themselves.’ Reconciliation, then, consists in maintaining what one loves, knows and hopes for while participating in a violence which is incapable of recognizing such capacities. With the loss of this tension, one becomes complicit with violence.

In the second letter, published in December 1943, Camus draws a distinction between the politics of reality or political realism and a politics of honour. Elsewhere he defines the former as a politics ‘devoid of morality,’ otherwise said, one of lies and

efficiency; and the latter as a politics “that makes a commitment.”<sup>56</sup> He also juxtaposes ideas honoured by the French, such as ‘friendship, mankind, happiness and a desire for justice,’ to the German mind now focused solely on arms, not ideas. Finally, in the third letter, published in April of 1944, he opposes the ideas each have of Europe. For the Germans it is literally property to be conquered and ruled. For the French it is

a home of the spirit where for the last twenty centuries the most amazing adventure of the human spirit has been going on. It is the privileged arena in which Western man’s struggle against the world, against the gods, against himself is today reaching its climax. (22)

For the French, as Europe is an adventure of the spirit “it always has to be established” (25). Much like Derrida’s notion of ‘the democracy to come,’ justice and liberty need always to be established. There is no ‘final solution,’ then, but only a constant approximation of the values which one holds important.

It is in the fourth letter that the cause of the divergent attitudes toward life is examined and the justification of the one over the other is undertaken. In light of this, I will leave the literary conceit behind. Camus begins from the premise that both the ‘Frenchman’ and the ‘German’ see the world as being without any intrinsic meaning and thus feel ‘cheated.’ As there is no ‘human or divine code of behavior,’ all actions are rendered equivalent and good and evil become merely a function of personal preference. While one chooses conquest, the other first tries to determine if taking up arms is just. In remaining faithful to an absurd reasoning, it appears that a passion for justice can only be considered one passion amongst other equally justified ones, including that of conquest.

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<sup>56</sup> Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, ed., *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 19 and 14, respectively. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as *Combat*.

Camus argues that the difference in the conclusions, that is, in the code of behavior each draws from the same premises, lies in the response of the individual to the fundamental misery of the human condition – one either succumbs to despair or one refuses our ‘revolting fate.’ In ‘raising despair to a principle of action,’ one adds to the misery of the world. Conversely, in choosing revolt, a passion for justice is pitted against ‘eternal injustice’ and a desire to create happiness in opposition to giving in to despair is thus a ‘protest against the universe of unhappiness’ (28).

The one who despairs concludes that ‘the only values are those of the animal world – in other words, cunning and violence. Hence ... man is negligible and his soul can be killed’ (27). The rebel chooses man. Through revolt, there is a ‘rediscovery of our solidarity against our fate’ and a refusal of the collective suicide which we call war. In answer to the question, ‘what is man,’ Camus states that “man is that force which ultimately cancels all tyrants and gods. He is the force of evidence. Human evidence is what we must preserve.... [T]here is something that still has a meaning” (14). Thus, while the world remains without meaning, something in the world has one – man.

Violence, empty or meaningless in itself, is granted value or meaning by the one who despairs, for whom ‘violence becomes more natural than thinking.’ Conversely, Camus argues that man has a meaning

because he is the only creature to insist on having one. This world has at least the truth of man, and our task is to provide its justifications against fate itself. And it has no justification but man; hence he must be saved if we want to save the idea we have of life. (28)

The justification of armed resistance, Camus concludes, is the preservation of witnesses to ‘the idea of man.’ In light of the notion of witnessing, it is important to note one last

tension which the rebel must sustain. Camus asserts that while the enemy is destroyed without pity, still he will not be hated as hatred of the enemy would be a betrayal of the very idea of man which the rebel is attempting to preserve. Thus, the latter “is obliged to respect in [the enemy] what [the enemy] does not respect in others” (30).

Recall that in the first cycle, despair and revolt are considered in terms of a metaphysic, that is, in terms of the individual’s experience of and response to the human condition – one commits suicide, intellectual or physical, or one accepts the evidence of the absurd and in revolt one chooses to live. In the second cycle, Camus examines the relationship of the personal and the social. While he does not develop the relationship in this letter, he does assert that war is the result of those in despair who ‘try to introduce their conclusions into history’ (27) and who, ‘having chosen it for themselves, ... thereby choose it for all’ (30). Revolt, too, is in the first instance a personal response, which may issue individually or collectively in resistance to injustice. In the case at hand, it results in taking up arms in the face of the aggressor. Again, while Camus does not directly treat the relationship between the personal and social in these letters, it can be said here that he never considers ‘social being’ in itself. Rather, he maintains a tension of the personal and social. Indeed, Camus’s objection to ‘committed literature’ is that it subsumes the personal entirely to the social. Apropos of this, he writes that “man is not *only* what he is in society. At least his death belongs to him. We are made to live in relationship to other people. But we die really only for ourselves” (NB/42: 80).

In these letters, the first text of his second cycle, Camus begins to focus on revolt as a way to confront the impasse resulting from the absurd – that of the radical

equivalency of action. While he does not abandon the evidence resulting from an absurd reasoning, in light of historical exigencies this impasse indicated the need to find a limit.

In a notebook entry in the spring of 1943, Camus writes,

Absurd. Restore morality by the Thou. I do not believe that there is another world in which we should ‘give account of ourselves.’ But we already have an account to render in this world – to all those whom we love. (NB/42: 48)

The possibility of the restoration of morality is established in these letters which present, in embryo, the themes he will take up for the next few years: revolt and the ‘the idea of man’ as a limit, that is, as a value. In the autumn of 1944, included under a notebook entry entitled “Essay on revolt,” Camus asks, “*Can man create his own values by himself? That is the whole problem*” (NB/42: 62). And in an entry of late December 1944 or early 1945, Camus notes that “[t]here is no objection to the totalitarian attitude other than the religious or moral one. If this world has no meaning, they are right. I cannot accept their being right. So...” (NB/42: 64). As these entries written almost immediately after the letters evidence, it appears that he had found a limit but not the grounds to support it. He begins to develop both the notion of a limit and its justification in his 1945 essay “*Remarque sur la révolte*.”

*“Remarque sur la révolte”*

Camus begins this essay with the question, ‘What is a rebel?’ He answers simply – a man who says *no*, which is a refusal, not a renouncement. Simultaneously, he is a man who says *yes*. At this point, Camus writes, we enter the examination of revolt. In *Le Mythe*, the revolt of the absurd man is announced but there is little if any consideration of the movement of revolt itself. Instead, the results of accepting the evidence arising from



the experience of the absurd are examined – that of a closed world; our radical solitude; the absence of any values and the resultant equivalency of all action. Again, the experience of the war rendered this impasse arising from an absurd reasoning an exigent matter. Whereas the absurd man of *L'Étranger* stands naked before existence (NB/42: 15), thereby giving evidence of our condition, he enters history as the rebel. This cycle is his story.

The essay on revolt is doubtlessly born of Camus's years with the Resistance, which was itself a movement of revolt. This period gave rise to new evidence, such as a sense of solidarity which 'refused to let man be consigned to the solitude that the enemy attitude was introducing into history' (Letters 32). While the men and women of the underground worked largely in solitude, the idea of man which they were attempting to save collectively gave rise to an awareness of their solidarity. Indeed, Camus was struck by the non-partisan character of their cooperation during which ideological differences were put aside in the service of man. In his *Combat* editorials, Camus repeatedly notes that nothing is due these men and women after the war as they had "done no more than what duty required" (65). However, he does argue that they at least act in an advisory capacity to any new government given the knowledge they had gained during the "five years of night."<sup>57</sup> In his examination of the movement of revolt, the idea of man and the sense of solidarity become key notions.

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<sup>57</sup> Albert Camus, *American Journals* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1978), trans. Hugh Levick. (London: Abacus, 1990), 32.

So too does love. Camus identifies the movement of revolt as ‘a movement of love.’ It is the love of man for man experienced as flesh and blood as opposed to an abstract love of ‘humanity’ which merely evidences a ‘poverty of heart’ or an espousal of an ideal such as the ‘goodness of human nature.’ Recall that in his lyrical essays a balance was maintained between love and revolt, between the *yes* and *no* to existence understood as tragic. It is this equilibrium which appears to be lost toward the end of his first cycle. Again, I suggest that *Le Mythe* is marked by a curious absence of love and thus ends as it begins – in nihilism. And while Meursault recalls his love of life at the end of the novel, he remains a profoundly solitary man. We are returned here to the question asked at the end of the first chapter of this paper. What eclipses the *yes* to existence and as such eclipses existence, if indeed it requires both our assent and refusal?

Revolt, writes Camus, is ‘equivalent’ to that of an absurd reasoning – both arise from the same awareness of existence. However, in revolt, which concerns ‘the logic of existence,’ there is a ‘definite advance.’ What was eclipsed in the first cycle begins to come into view in this essay – love of flesh and blood, that is, of the body, which itself begins to surface in Camus’s examination of revolt. The history of this eclipse is considered in *L’Homme révolté*, of which this essay is a draft. Here I will summarize the arguments of the latter as briefly as possible as they are the bare bones which are later fleshed out in *L’Homme révolté*.

*i. On the movement of revolt and the individual*

Camus opens this examination with a phenomenological analysis of the movement of revolt and that which it evidences. In the first instance, this movement

always and only begins with the individual. By example, Camus describes the experience of an official who, upon receiving an order from a superior and finding it unacceptable, ‘draws up and says, no.’ The no “signifies, for example, ‘things are hard enough,’ ‘there are limits which one cannot overstep,’ this far yes, further no.’ In short, this no affirms the existence of a limit.”<sup>58</sup> He feels too that his superior ‘has not reason for this,’ that ‘he has overstepped his rights.’ The frontier or limit ‘founds’ the sense of a right which he feels gives him reason for his revolt. Because of this, his no is simultaneously a yes. At the same time that he refuses the ‘intrusion,’ “he affirms the limit and all that he holds and preserves on this side of the limit.... [T]here is in all revolt a total and immediate adherence in the individual to a certain part of the experience” (9). Thus, it is not merely the refusal of a particular order as his revolt “signifies ‘there are things that I cannot do,’ as well as ‘there are things that you cannot do’” (9). As such, “the affirmation of the revolt extends to something which transcends the individual which he holds in his supposed solitude, and which founds a value” (10).

This movement is also ‘almost always retroactive,’ then. All the orders the official has agreed to in the past, when he was not as yet sure of his right, are taken up in this revolt. He thereby transcends his past and the role of the ‘official’ in his complete adherence to the experience of this irreducible part of himself. Finally, it is a movement of ‘all or nothing.’ His total identification with this part of himself, which he feels ‘summarizes him,’ is the ‘all’ that, however obscure, he is willing to sacrifice rather than

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<sup>58</sup> Albert Camus, “Remarque sur la révolte,” in *L’Existence*, ed. Jean Grenier (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 9. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as RR. The translation is mine.

bow down before that which attempts to dominate him. He needs that it be respected and recognized in his person and at the limit he is willing to accept death. Thus, he “puts in balance death and that which he will call his ‘liberty,’ for example” (10).

Camus then begins to delimit this value. In the movement of revolt there is a consequent awareness, however confused, which “resides in the sudden perception of a value with which the man can identify totally” (10). While the perception of it arises in the individual’s experience, Camus distinguishes it from individualism in arguing that it problematizes the notion of the individual itself. This is evidenced by the rebel’s willingness to sacrifice “himself to the benefit of a truth which goes beyond his individual destiny, which goes much further than his personal existence” (11). He feels that it “does not belong to him alone but is a common place where all men, even those who insult and oppress him, have an immediate solidarity” (11). Thus this part of him is something he feels he ‘shares with all men’ and which ‘requires all men to be composed.’ This indicates a ‘complicity’ which the rebel shares with victim and oppressor alike.

Nor is it simply egoism, argues Camus, as one can revolt against the self as well, as, for instance, ‘against happiness, the weight of glory, the excess of goods, etc.’ Moreover, the rebel may defend a person who is oppressed in cases where he himself would not balk, which thereby distinguishes revolt from ‘empathy.’ Rather, “it is solely an identification of destinies and a taking part” (11). The rebel transcends himself horizontally, that is, toward other people in opposition to the vertical transcendence associated with God or Platonic ideas (10). And it is this which renders ‘human solidarity metaphysical’ according to Camus.

It is evident from this that he is rethinking the notion of the ‘metaphysical.’ By it Camus intends the human condition as opposed to something beyond, behind or underlying the closed world evidenced in the experience of the absurd. In his ‘recognition of solidarity,’ the absurd man becomes aware that the suffering he has thus far experienced as his alone is a ‘collective plague.’ Camus asserts that “[i]n the experience of the absurd, tragedy is individual. With the movement of revolt, there is the consciousness that it is collective. It is the adventure of all” (11). For the one who undergoes this movement, the absurd world henceforth becomes the world of revolt wherein the order of man is chosen against the order of God. It is a choice “of the most concrete part of experience in order to defend it against that which opposes it. One affirms that there is a part of man superior to the condition in which he exists” (12). Thereby, the movement of revolt reveals ‘the first truth,’ which is that man is not alone; and it creates the first value, ‘the idea of man,’ which results in ‘an ethics of accomplices.’

Camus argues that for man there exist two possible universes – the sacred and the world of revolt. With the disappearance of one, the other invariably arises. In the sacred, all possible responses are given at once, that is, the world is ‘explained.’ Speech and action are understood as functions of grace and ‘all that remains is commentary.’ Conversely, in the world of revolt, wherein man is thrown back upon the human condition, there is only ‘interrogation and contestation.’ Explanation, of course, is always secondary. What is first is that which needs to be recognized – the human condition. In the sacred world, then, ‘metaphysics becomes myth.’

Camus claims that the rebel is “the man cast outside of the sacred... who is applied to claiming a human order where all the responses are human” (14) and that in contemporary Western history, ‘whole societies now exist outside of the sacred.’ Given the experience of solidarity arising in the movement of revolt, he argues that this phenomenon is not merely a function of a particular civilization and *époque*. This sense of solidarity “seems to suggest, rather, a consciousness that the human species increasingly has of itself in its common adventure” (14). He concludes this section with the assertion that

[t]o say that the problem is relative to an *époque* is therefore by no means saying that it is not first in man and that it only has value in an individualist ethics. It says, on the contrary, that the *époque*, by dint of contestation, sets on the first plane one of the essential dimensions of man. It is an authentic value, that is to say, a reason to act. (15)

In revolt, the first value is that of our solidarity which is discovered in the experience of the irreducible part of man and the first truth is that ‘we are not alone.’ This value, then, provides us with both a reason to act and a measure of our revolt, be it metaphysical, political rebellion or revolution. Any violation of the solidarity that is the impetus for our revolt is equally the measure of its failure. If this point is reached, the movement of revolt needs to repeat itself or one remains in abstraction, that is, the experience gives way to the idea as opposed to the defence of the concrete value from which the revolt took its impetus. Lastly, all movements of revolt result in a response on a personal, political and/or metaphysical level. In this section of Camus’s essay, the personal response is implicit in the analysis of the movement of revolt itself. Revolt is the personal response to that which wants to crush the irreducible part of the individual. In the latter two

sections of the essay, Camus considers how personal revolt manifests itself on the plane of history, that is, in political and metaphysical revolt. Thereby the relationship of the personal, political and metaphysical begins to come into focus.

*ii. On historical revolt: Rebellion and revolution*

Camus first distinguishes political rebellion from revolution. At the limit, the latter is an attempt ‘to give the irreducible part of man his reign in time.’ Conversely, rebellion solely witnesses to this part of man and issues in nothing other than testimony. It is a limited protest, often inchoate, ‘contesting neither systems nor ideas.’ The essential distinction between these two political movements is that revolution is “the passage of an idea into historical experience, whereas revolt, on the contrary, is the movement which leads from individual experience to the idea” (16). The ‘clarity of the idea in revolt’ is lost in the attempt to mould reality in light of it. That is, the concrete experience which gives rise to the idea is occluded in revolution as the latter is “an attempt to model acts on an idea, in order to fashion the world in a body of theory” (16).

While there have been attempts at definitive revolutions, such as the Christian and the Communist, at some point they invariably give rise to a movement of opposition. Thus, ‘they cut back into the same circle of history which a definitive revolution, by definition, undertakes to transform entirely.’ According to Camus, a definitive revolution would be the end of history. In light of this contradiction, he concludes that “the history of man is only the sum of their successive revolts” (16).

The failure of definitive revolutions largely results from their ‘pretension to the absolute’ which is always attended by ‘the loss of complicity.’ The feeling of having a

right which arises in the movement of revolt has, as content, a confused sense of liberty and justice. Revolution raises these ideas to the status of absolutes. But history indicates that their ‘mutual exigencies’ exclude each other once raised to this status. Absolute liberty is won only at the expense of justice, just as absolute justice denies liberty. Thus, all definitive revolutions give birth to an opposing revolt as ‘complicity can be lost in either silence or in falsehood’. Camus argues that

from the moment men are silenced or are no more than the passage and echo of the divine word, from the moment when men lie (political realism), the complicity is, not lost, this is never possible, but denied, and despair begins with the negation of the first truth carried by revolt, the knowledge that we are not alone. (18)

Camus claims that revolution gives lie to the relative character of the value which it hopes to bring into history, that is, to that part of man which is irreducible. It is the part of man which is oppressed and as such stands in relation to that which attempts to crush it. The latter, with its pretensions to absolute power, is countered by the rebel’s desire for ‘relative powers to be mutually conceded.’ In light of this preference, Camus asserts that “the sole revolution in the measure of man should reside in the conversion to the relative which signifies fidelity to the human condition” (19).

If the ‘ideal limit of a definitive revolution is to give the irreducible part of man his reign in time,’ then total complicity is a ‘question of an ideal limit.’ However, “outside of eternity there is only improving” (19). Thus revolts which remain faithful to the function of witnessing ‘help in the definitive revolution.’ But remaining faithful to this value is only possible in a constant repetition of revolt without pretensions to the absolute. Positively, what is evidenced in the relation of this value to revolt and revolution is that



all revolution goes beyond the political in order to affirm the revolt of man against his destiny, that the solitude of man is never only the work of men and that revolt is above all an affirmation of speech and complicity, obstinately in the limited condition of the creature. (19)

By ‘going beyond the political order’ Camus clearly intends that all revolt, including the political, is implicitly a metaphysical revolt as well. Recall the relation Camus establishes between despair in man’s condition and the enemy attitude. The violence perpetrated by the aggressor is understood ultimately as a function of his despair of existence and his attempt to introduce his conclusions into history. It is in the last section of this essay that Camus specifies what he intends by ‘metaphysics’ and as in *Le Mythe*, he both invokes the tradition and subverts it.

*iii. On metaphysical revolt*

Camus begins this section with a further observation concerning revolt. In the movement of revolt there is a double affirmation – that which the rebel wants to defend and simultaneously that of the existence of the oppressor. The rebel recognizes that there are two ‘opposing values’ standing on ‘this side and the other side of the limit which he draws in his revolt.’ According to Camus, the relation of dominance and submission is thereby relative as the rebel can put into question the dominance of his superior. What is affirmed is that ‘they stand in the same history.’ He notes that this double affirmation does not appear to apply to God, however, and thus ‘it is difficult to maintain that revolt is metaphysical.’ He argues that if this reasoning were to be generalized, God would be in history and subject to the same conditions of the absurd, that is, “in the same humiliating adventure as man, ... engaged in history after all” (20). Thus God too would be subject to the ‘unanimous consent of men’ to establish ‘eternal stability,’ that is, to

value has been created ‘without help from the eternal’ – that value which arises in the experience of revolt itself. In specifying this value further, he claims that it “is not in the irreducibility of man nor in the situation against which he struggles, but in the relation sustained between them, and which is, properly speaking, the human condition. It is a relative absolute” (22). He asserts that an absurd reasoning, which absolutely denies value judgments, is in fact contradictory. We do make value judgments and do so because they are ‘tied to the fact of existence itself.’ Thus, the value the rebel “discovers in himself... authorizes him (and ... forces him) to speak and act” (22).

This value is a relative absolute discovered only in and through our response to the situation in which we find ourselves. Importantly, the discovery of this value in existence, ‘outside of the eternal,’ is the discovery of a good – and thus of the innocence of man, claims Camus. As man is not ‘guilty,’ the need of a ‘Judge’ is denied as well. This is a restatement of Camus’s belief that there is no other world “in which we should ‘give account of ourselves.’ But we already have an account to render in this world – to all those whom we love” (NB/42: 48). This essay thus simultaneously advances beyond *Le Mythe* and continues the critique of Christianity he initiated there. Camus has found something to affirm other than God – the love of man for man, ‘a movement beyond anguish outside of eternity.’ There is a reason to act and a measure of the action we choose. While often the best intentions end by violating that which we wish to preserve, which results from the relativity of our condition, there is only beginning again within this closed circle of existence wherein “[r]eal generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present” (R 304).

*On 'the present'*

I noted at the outset of this chapter that over the course of the cycle on the rebel, Camus largely unpacks the conclusions he reaches from 1943-1944 in his “Lettres à un ami Allemand.” This comment needs to be augmented prior to briefly considering the last of the analytic works listed above, Camus’s 1946 essay “Ni victimes ni bourreaux.” To this end, I think it instructive to sketch the historical context in which this latter piece was written.

The slogan of the Resistance paper *Combat* was ‘*From Resistance to Revolution*’ and until roughly the end of 1944, Camus used the catchphrases ‘total war’ and ‘total revolution’ in his editorials. The newspaper, and Camus with it, desired that a ‘social revolution’ follow the cessation of the war which would consist in the establishment of a liberal democracy and a socialist economy. There was, as well, a collective desire for a ‘purging’ of the old order of power, the policies of which were considered to have in part facilitated the total war which Europe had just undergone. Those who had collaborated with the Germans were to be brought to justice. The hope was that a new order would be instituted such that the horrors of World War I and II would not be repeated yet again. Otherwise said, the resistance was to the resumption of ‘business as usual’ following the end of the war, and the belief was that a social revolution would redress the injustices and simultaneously instate a more just order. This notion of ‘revolution,’ at least for Camus, was not ideologically inspired as was, for example, that of the Communist revolution, though its goals were not dissimilar. Indeed, in an editorial of September 19, 1944, Camus avows his belief in only ‘relative revolutions’ as opposed to ‘definitive’ because

‘all human effort is relative,’ a stance he develops in the 1945 essay. Following the liberation of Paris in August of 1944, the ‘Provisional Government of the French Republic,’ and its leader, Charles de Gaulle, returned to Paris. This body was part of the Resistance movement which had spent the years fighting the war from England. And in September of 1944, “special courts of justice replace[d] the courts-martial and military tribunals, marking the beginnings of the official purge” (Combat 312).

In his *Combat* editorial of October 18, 1944, Camus asserts that ‘the purge is necessary,’ noting that “as difficult as this may be for souls that cherish justice and liberty, we must resign ourselves to it for a brief period” (78). He initially stood behind the purge as he believed the poison had to be eradicated from the system in order that a new beginning be made possible for the French people. He then outlines the principles which he believes the purge should follow in order that it not result in a travesty of justice similar to the one it was attempting to redress. He argues for a principle of proportional justice, such that those who had filled the highest positions of trust in the nation be held primarily accountable and be proportionally punished. While Camus had always been staunchly against the death sentence, he became its advocate in relation to those who had ‘consorted with the enemy’. In opposition to those “men whose lives were based on the respect and privilege they were accorded by the nation” (77), Camus argued that others who had collaborated “be punished by striking at their most vital interests” (77). The example he gives is of “a writer and actor who continued to perform during the Occupation” (77). His interest, says Camus, is his vanity and thus he should be debarred from the stage hereafter. He also believed the purge should extend beyond the highest of

government officials to those in industry, banks and the newspapers which had supported the old regime. Finally, he claims that a “temporal limit [should be imposed] on the exercise of what might be called moral justice” (77). In his October 25<sup>th</sup> editorial, he again argues for the necessity of the purge claiming that “we must renounce that part of ourselves that would prefer the consolations of forgetfulness and tenderness” (90).

The purge, however, was carried out ad hoc and not infrequently those who were in the lowest positions of power were sentenced to death to the exclusion of those whom Camus held were most accountable. This is evidenced in Camus’s editorial of January 5, 1945, which opens with a reference to the ‘absurd sentences and preposterous instances of leniency.’ He claims that

[w]e want to say simply that all of this was to be expected and that it is probably too late now for justice to be done. The justice we called for was difficult to implement because it required reconciling the country’s pressing need to destroy the treacherous part of itself with our insistence on due respect for the individual. Quick justice was essential to achieve that end. (164)

In a short time, he clearly had become disillusioned with the purge and with the possibility of justice being served by it. The implications of this travesty of justice, as of those of the war years, lie behind the last essay to be considered in this chapter, “Ni victimes ni bourreaux.” I will, however, only briefly introduce the themes of this essay as they are taken up in *La Peste* and in *L’Homme révolté*.

*“Ni victimes ni bourreaux”*

In a notebook entry of mid-1946 or so, Camus writes, “The Terror! And they already forgot” (NB/42: 88). A consideration of this terror under which Europe had lived for the last ten years, and which Camus asserts ‘is not yet over,’ forms the premise of “Ni

victimes ni bourreaux.”<sup>59</sup> This text is a series consisting of eight continuous editorials published in *Combat* from November 19-30, 1946, the first of which is subtitled “The Century of Fear.” Camus opens the series stating that “[t]he seventeenth century was the century of mathematics. The eighteenth century was the century of physical science, and the nineteenth century of biology. Our twentieth century is the century of fear” (257), which, ‘if not a science, is a method.’ He speaks of the ‘materially obstructed future’ of the larger part of the population which, he writes, ‘lives without a sense of future, like dogs with their backs against the wall.’ He does allow that this is not peculiar to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though with one key difference. Whereas in the past, people felt there was a common set of values to which they could appeal, he asserts that “something in us succumbed to recent experience” (258). He claims that what had succumbed is “man’s eternal confidence, which always fostered the belief that we could elicit human reactions from other human beings by speaking to them in the language of humanity” (258). While reason was appealed to during the war years, there was no way of persuading those who committed the atrocities “because they were sure of themselves and because there is no way of persuading an abstraction, or, to put it another way, the representative of an ideology” (258). Camus thus argues that the possibility of dialogue had been cut off and the silencing of people had begun, both by the ideologies of the Right and of the Left. For example, the accommodation of Spain’s dictator, Franco, by the Right in both the USA and Europe, appealed to the need to defeat the Communists. And the Left proscribed speech about the crimes committed by the Communists as they believed such talk would

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<sup>59</sup> Albert Camus, “Neither Victims nor Executioners,” in *Combat*, 257-276. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as NVB.

undermine the Revolution. Thus, Camus especially addresses those who have been silenced by the fear inspired by those of the Right and Left; those who are unable to subscribe to ideologies; and those who are no longer comfortable as adherents.

Camus's notion of politics, which is evidenced in this essay, is made clear in a notebook entry in late 1947 wherein he reflects upon his understanding of politics as opposed to the general critique of his position. There he writes,

The criticisms because my books do not bring out the political aspect. Translation: they want me to represent political parties. But I represent only individuals, opposed to the State machine, because I know what I am talking about. (NB/42: 120)

In "Ni victimes ni bourreaux," Camus argues that it is precisely the State machine of the Left and Right which legitimates murder in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He claims that the fear it inspires must be come to terms with. This requires that 'what it signifies and what it rejects' be understood. He asserts that this collective experience of fear "signifies and rejects the same fact: a world in which murder is legitimate and human life is considered futile" (259). In light of this, the goal of the series is to "define the conditions for a modest political philosophy, that is, a philosophy free of all messianic elements and devoid of any nostalgia for an earthly paradise" (261). The hope underlying this effort is "to save the bodies in order to keep open the possibility of the future" (261).

In this editorial, the subtitle of which is "Saving Bodies," Camus notes that "for my part, I have learned over the past two years in particular that there is no truth I would place above the life of a human being" (260). Recall the notion of revolution which Camus did espouse in his essay "Remarque sur la révolte." There he writes that "the sole revolution in the measure of man should reside in the conversion to the relative which

signifies fidelity to the human condition” (19). This period may well have marked Camus’s decisive ‘conversion to the relative,’ which I believe is the task undertaken in *La Peste* as well.

At this point, it is instructive to consider another comment Camus makes about writing. Sometime in late 1939 he notes,

[r]econcile the descriptive with the explanatory work. Give description its true meaning. When it stands alone, it is admirable but carries no conviction. All we then need to do is make it clear that our limitations have been chosen deliberately. They then disappear, and the work can ‘prolong its echoes’. (NB/35: 78)

This comment again highlights Camus’s sense of the relationship his works bear to one another. It will also guide my presentation of *La Peste*. I will first consider the dominant interpretation and critique of the novel in an effort to determine precisely which echoes Camus might be prolonging. It will be followed by an analysis of the novel in light of the explanatory work thus far discussed.

### *Part II: A literal image of terror: An introduction to La Peste*

In most comparisons of *L’Etranger* and *La Peste*, the latter novel is thought to be ‘clearer’ than the former. It is literally a chronicle of a plague which besieges the town of Oran in North Africa, a ‘modern city like any other,’ in 194– for a period of nine months. The narrator, anonymous until the last chapter of the book, impersonally charts the rise and fall of the plague while simultaneously considering both the general reactions of the citizens and of the responses of a few of those who take part in the fight against it. The language is simple and the themes, those of the sense of suffocation, exile and separation which the citizens undergo, are vividly described. Indeed, it has been considered by some



to be a somewhat didactic novel. In *Albert Camus: The Invincible Summer*, Albert Maquet claims that *La Peste* was greeted with instant critical and public acclaim upon its publication in 1947 in spite of the fact that “nothing is conceded to imagination or sentiment, and everything is offered to the intellect.”<sup>60</sup> Camus’s generation easily read it as a critique of totalitarian regimes and of the war from which Europe had just emerged, as well as a restatement of the absurdist philosophy, that of the closed world, the ultimate incomprehensibility of existence and of our natural solitude. Thus, the novel readily lends itself to being read on different levels – as a literal account of a plague which reflects the general conditions of existence, and, it appears, as an allegorical account of the war.<sup>61</sup>

*La Peste*, which I read in my late teens, was my introduction to the works of Camus. I imagine I would have read it as an allegorical account of World War II as had Camus’s contemporaries, but reading it just over thirty years later, I read it outside of the historical context in which references to the French Resistance and the German occupation are immediately recognizable. As such, I read it at face value – as a chronicle of a plague and of the individual and collective responses to a natural disaster. The overwhelming impression I had of the novel was that it is profoundly religious in the root sense of the word, that is, ‘to bind fast.’ It was clearly not a book about God, but rather about love and resistance as the ties that bind. Needless to say, I was rather surprised by Maquet’s assertion that *La Peste* offers everything to the intellect, conceding nothing to imagination or sentiment.

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<sup>60</sup> Albert Maquet, *Albert Camus: The Invincible Summer*, trans. Herma Briffault (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1958), 75. Hereafter cited as Maquet in the body of the text.

<sup>61</sup> Though *La Peste* is not read as an allegorical account of the war by all commentators, as for example Maquet, it does appear to be the dominant interpretation.

While researching this novel, I learned that it is the use of a natural disaster which most disturbs the critics as on an allegorical reading it is interpreted as a metaphor for social evil. As a ‘device,’ it is considered too weak to carry the weight of the moral guilt which attaches to war (King 76-78). Indeed, Roland Barthes’s critique went as far as to claim that it is a novel which “lays the foundation for an antihistorical ethic and an attitude of political solitude.”<sup>62</sup> As such, it represents Camus’s rejection of “the solidarity of our history-in-the-making” (LCE 340). An allegorical reading of the novel lines up the walled and isolated city of Oran with occupied France; the plague microbes with the Germans; and the sanitary squads with the Resistance. On this reading, the plague acts as a reference to the absurd universe, ‘the obscure walls against which we grope,’ and doubles as a symbol for the German who, according to Sartre, in choosing injustice, “allied himself with the blind forces of nature” (Lazere 180). Indeed, during the retreat of the plague, Camus does refer to it as ‘an animal returning to its lair.’ This notion of ‘doubling,’ that is, of a one to one correspondence between the metaphor and its referent, is the general assumption of allegory. Again, the sanitary squads are considered to be an analogue for the French Resistance. As a metaphor, this is considered a failure as well, however, as the actions taken by the Resistance resulted in the death of civilians at the hands of both the Vichy regime and the Germans in retaliation. The moral suffering involved in this type of choice cannot, of course, be carried by the metaphor of the

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<sup>62</sup> Albert Camus, “Letter to Roland Barthes on *La Peste*,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 338-341. This quote is found on p. 339.

sanitary squads, which as Lazere points out is equivalent to the apolitical actions of the Red Cross (182).

I could not help but wonder precisely what an allegorical account of the recent past could offer to those who had just lived through it. That the war was experienced as absurd was coincident with the general sense of the era during which Camus wrote. Thus, while mapping the general sense of existence and the war might be instructive to future generations, it would hardly say much to those just coming out of the ‘five years of night.’ I suggest the dominant critique of this novel presupposes that Camus intended a one to one correspondence of a natural disaster for social evil (human condition/social-political). The deficiencies of the correspondence are then lamented. The question which largely does not appear to be asked is why Camus chose it, that is, the deliberateness of Camus’s choice does not appear to be granted.

It is useful at this point to consider another comment Camus makes about literature in his notebooks. He asserts that “[a] symbol always remains on the general plane and an artist gives a rough translation of it. Word for word translations don’t exist. Only the general movement is restored” (NB/42: 26). That Camus intended a one to one correspondence between the metaphor and its apparent referent is, in light of this comment, unlikely. Moreover, it can be assumed that Camus was as aware as the critics of the disjunction between a natural disaster and social evil, that is, he will have recognized its limitations as a device. Still he chose to use a natural disaster in this novel. The question is why.

In his response to Barthes's criticism that *La Peste* represents his refusal of 'the solidarity of our history-in-the-making,' Camus writes that

*The Plague*, which I wanted to be read on a number of levels, nevertheless has as *its obvious content* the struggle of the European resistance movements against Nazism.... *The Plague* is more than a chronicle of the Resistance. But certainly it is nothing less. (LCE 339; italics mine)

He also notes that "I'm reproached with the fact that *The Plague* can apply to any resistance against any tyranny" (LCE 340). Again, the disjunction between a natural disaster and dictatorship concerns that between natural and moral evil. What needs to be determined, then, is what these two phenomena share. Camus's answer is that they are equally a reign of terror, which 'has several faces.'

In a notebook entry of December of 1942, Camus writes that

I want to express by means of the plague the suffocation from which we all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we lived. At the same time, I want to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general. The plague will give the image of those whose share in this war has been that of reflection, silence – and moral suffering. (NB/42: 35)

I suggest that what is of import to Camus is the condition invoked in us by any reign of terror – be it a natural disaster, war, the aftershock of war or the all but imperceptible acts of violence we inflict upon each other daily. By its very universality, the use of the natural disaster of plague extends to all forms of plague, that is, to any and all reigns of terror from that imposed in the privacy of homes to the collective virulence of war. It extends as well to the human condition. Our primordial terror is that we will die. If indeed it is the sense of terror which Camus is addressing in *La Peste*, then the plague is an apt vehicle. The plague is not a 'visible' enemy, at least to the naked human eye. We

see and experience only its effects. This, of course, is the essence of the experience of terror – it is something we undergo, that is, it is first and foremost that which is suffered.

Camus claims that *La Peste* is “the first attempt to put a collective passion into a form” (NB/42: 42). Arguably, the echoes of the war are not allegorical in intent, but are an attempt to evoke a visceral memory, rather than merely a mental recall, of the terror and attendant feelings amongst his generation of readers. And the vividness of the descriptions in the novel ensures that subsequent readers who have experienced trauma of any sort will also be recalled to a visceral memory of it. Camus is thereby able to evince in the reader a bodily memory of the suffering and the recognition that the human tragedy is collective, not merely individual. Maquet notes that “never are the epidemic and its ravages evoked for their own sake. They constitute a framework of facts which subtend the expression of human suffering, the expression of revolt inspired by such suffering” (83). In recalling a visceral sense of fear in the reader, there also arises the possibility of an actual revolt against it as opposed to merely a forgetting of it. As Camus says in “Ni victimes ni bourreaux,” the terror is not yet over.

In a notebook entry written sometime near the end of 1942, and included amongst a series of notes on *La Peste*, Camus asserts that

[w]hat seems to me most characteristic of this period is separation. All were separated from the rest of the world, from those they loved or from their habits. And, in this retreat, those who could were forced to meditate, and the others to live the life of a hunted animal. In short, there was no middle way. (NB/42: 33)

It is through the juxtaposition of the general reactions of the citizens, which end in either anarchic or apathetic behavior, and the behavior of those who resist that Camus reflects these two possible responses to the plague, that is, to any reign of terror. Both groups

suffer from the same terror, experience the same sense of separation and threat, but respond quite differently. One group is haunted and feels hunted, whereas the other refuses to bow down before the terror. The question is why. I suggest it is related to our power of abstraction, references to which appear throughout *La Peste* as will be discussed below. This capacity is also examined in essays prior to this novel, notably in *Le Mythe* and in “Ni victimes ni bourreaux.” And as will be considered in the next chapter, this capacity is explored yet more fully in *L’Homme révolté*.

*La Peste* is a restatement of *Le Mythe*, that is, of the absurd universe. On one level, the structure of the novel is in fact a literal image of the closed world. The novel ends with a return to the beginning, which I will consider toward the conclusion of this analysis. In terms of content, it is replicated by the closed gates of the city of Oran during the plague. There is no way out, no way in. In short, there is no where else to go, as Beckett says in *Endgame*. And through the themes of separation and exile, Camus invokes the experiences of the absurd man or the ‘solitary stranger.’ Camus had by this point taken a step beyond *Le Mythe*, as is evidenced in the 1945 essay in particular. Again, in this essay he more closely examines the human condition which, he concludes, consists in the tension maintained between the individual and the situation in which he finds himself. Through charting the reactions of the general population and of a few of those who resist, the two possible personal responses to a reign of terror are effectively described. Again, there are those who succumb to the terror invoked by the invisible enemy and those who refuse to bow before it, as exemplified by the sanitary squads. It is the latter group which recognizes that the tragedy of the human condition is collective,

that is, ‘it is everybody’s business,’ as various characters repeat in an almost refrain-like manner throughout *La Peste*.

The novel is also a literal image on the historical plane. While the content focuses on the emotional experience invoked by a reign of terror, through a clever sleight of hand the structure invokes the reality of the war and its aftermath. The first and last chapters of *La Peste* effectively bracket the chronicle of the plague. In chapter one, the narrator introduces the town and obliquely refers to the events which occurred there in 194–, simply referring to the ‘events’ to be described as ‘unusual.’ He also notes that he will identify himself in due time. The introduction to the town in which these events occur occupies the bulk of this short chapter. Oran is described as a basically ugly city, devoid of greenery and birds and where the only sign of nature is the sky above. The town, which sits on a plateau above the sea, is designed with its back toward the sea such that ‘you always have to go look for it.’ The description of the town is essentially that which Camus drew in his lyrical essay of 1939, “The Minotaur or the Halt at Oran.” The verisimilitude can thus be assumed. He then describes the life of the inhabitants, one which is largely ordered by business and the habits which sustain us in work, entertainment, love and death. In short, he writes “[t]reeless, glamourless, soulless, the town of Oran ends by seeming restful and, after a while, you go complacently to sleep there.”<sup>63</sup> It is, in other words, a ‘thoroughly modern town’ and essentially a description of the mechanical life lived prior to the experience of the absurd in any modern town.

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<sup>63</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970), 7. As this part of the chapter focuses on *La Peste*, references will be cited simply by page number in the body of the paper. In subsequent chapters, citations appearing in the body of the text will be identified as P. [*La Peste*. Paris: Gallimard, 1947.]

He also writes brief notes concerning the initial reactions of the citizens to the events, such as their surprise in spite of premonitory signs; comments about the possible reactions of readers of the chronicle, some of whom will find it ‘quite natural’ and others ‘incredible,’ depending on their outlook, for which, he adds, the narrator cannot take account; and then he states what he sees to be his task and the justification for undertaking it. He presents himself as a witness amongst thousands of others who can testify to the ‘events to be chronicled,’ but as one who was “by the force of things, closely involved in all that he proposes to narrate” (7-8). This is “his justification for playing the part of an historian” (8). Finally, he lists the three sources he will use – what he saw; what others saw and spoke about with him; and documents which he received after the events.

In this brief introduction to the ‘events to be chronicled,’ Camus predisposes the readers of 1947 to expect a novel about the war. More specifically, given the narrator’s comments and the readers’ familiarity with Camus’s work with *Combat* during the war, the expectation created is that of a novel about the Resistance. However, the remainder of the first section of the novel stymies expectations as it opens with the appearance of a dead rat and closes with a telegram that announces: “*Proclaim a state of plague Stop close the town*” (56). Thus, he points the reader in a particular direction, but shows her something else. Further, in the last chapter when the narrator finally identifies himself as Dr. Rieux, he continues to use the third person pronoun with which he speaks of himself



throughout the chronicle, as exemplified in the above quotes. This device indicates the character but points beyond it. The misdirection is maintained here as well, then.

Structurally, the novel points beyond itself three times – to events beyond it, the war; to the author beyond the narrator, Camus; and in the last chapter, to the aftermath of the war. The novel is thereby effectively surrounded by the historical reality which is, according to Camus, the ‘obvious content’ of the novel. He thereby creates a literal image of the world as a closed circle, tying it to the actual reality through which Camus and his contemporaries lived. If the war and its aftermath are the ‘obvious content’ of the chronicle, what is the ‘less obvious?’ I suggest it is precisely that which is invoked by war or plague – terror and the possible responses toward it.

#### *Purpose of the chronicle*

The chronicle is self-consciously written in an impersonal tone; and the narrator, Dr. Rieux, slowly discloses his reasons for adopting this form. First, he claims to have maintained an objective tone for stylistic purposes. He feels that a dispassionate tone best represents the reality of great catastrophes which is marked by monotony, that is, by the levelling of any ‘exalted emotions’ (149) which is induced by the “deliberate progress of some monstrous thing crushing out all upon its path” (148). For example, the initial separation from loved ones locked outside of Oran when the gates are closed is felt deeply and bitterly. Slowly imagination fails, however, and one can no longer imagine what the loved one might be doing. Finally, even the memory of a loved one’s face loses its ‘fleshly substance,’ that is, memory itself becomes ‘disembodied’ (Maquet 78). The impersonal tone, then, best reflects the ‘wasting away emotionally as well as physically’

which sustained calamities induce. The separation of which the narrator speaks is of course physical, but more profoundly, it concerns the loss of the sense of the reality of loved ones, of the sense of ever having experienced anything other than a stark solitude devoid of a felt unity of any sort. In fact, the narrator claims that his task is to “be the chronicler of the troubled, rebellious hearts of our townsfolk under the impact of the plague” (110). The chronicle, which charts the history of the progress of the plague, is thus undertaken as a testimony to that which was suffered by the citizens under the conditions of plague, that is, as a witness to the “unremitting waves of fear and agonized revolt” (244). Rieux claims that ‘to be an honest witness’ was to abstract as much as possible from allusions to his personal suffering as he was “deterred by the thought that not one of his sufferings but was common to all the others in a world where sorrow is so often lonely this was an advantage. Thus, decidedly, it was up to him to speak for all” (246-7).

I suggest *La Peste* is a history of the mind and heart under conditions of plague, that is, under a ‘reign of terror’ (160; 242), rather than an account of that reign, be it that of plague or war. He concludes the chronicle with the claim that it was a bearing of witness in favour of ‘those plague-stricken people’ (251) and of those who had done what “had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts” (251-2). The next element to be determined is what is meant by ‘plague.’

*Abstraction and plague*

The epidemic is literally a type of bubonic plague which eventually mutates and becomes pneumonic as well. In short, it is a natural disaster ‘beyond the measure of man,’ says Rieux. When the death toll begins to decline, indicating the ‘retreat’ of the epidemic, Rieux notes that it came as it went. He writes that

it is doubtful if this could be called a victory. All that could be said was that the disease seemed to be leaving as unaccountably as it had come. Our strategy had not changed, but whereas yesterday it had obviously failed, today it seemed triumphant. (219)

He closes the chronicle on a cautionary note as well, claiming that “the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; ... it bides its time...” (251). In this description of the plague there are obvious echoes of the experience of the absurd with which Camus is clearly aligning it. Just as the personal experience of the absurd comes and goes unbidden, so great catastrophes such as natural disasters and wars share in the element of the irrational. Importantly, these situations share the same effects which are indicated by the various ways in which the plague and the reactions of the population are described. I will first note the descriptors of the plague, followed by a list of its most general effects. Then it will be considered in terms of what the citizens undergo and their responses to what they suffer.

The plague is referred to as ‘an absurd situation’ (73); a ‘fact’ (73); an ‘abstraction,’ that is, a force which disrupts our routines and constructs, resulting in ‘a divorce from reality’ (75); as ‘impartial justice,’ in that all are under the same ‘sentence’ (140); as the ‘great leveler, monotony, mediocrity’ (149); as ‘violence’ (219); and as a

‘reign of terror’ (160; 242). And it is ascribed one meaning – it is ‘the same thing, over and over again’ (135). These descriptors equally apply to the experience of the absurd and to the first awareness, at least mathematically, that we will die. However, what was experienced on the level of the individual in *Le Mythe* is rendered our collective tragedy in this novel. The description also echoes the themes from “Ni victimes ni bourreaux,” in which Camus considers the collective tragedy of postwar Europe and the sense of fear that he feels pervades the West in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This latter text is most evident in the description of the effects of the plague.

Its most general effects are the creation of ‘a victim world secluded and apart’ (88), ‘with our backs to the wall... that plague had built around us’ (183). Rieux notes that ‘all became hostile to the past’ or memory. A vivid memory of an earlier life induces anguish once exiled from it and fills one with regret for what one had not properly attended to or loved well. As noted above, however, memory eventually fades such that another form of life becomes unimaginable. Equally, all were ‘impatient of the present and felt cheated of the future’ (62). During a reign of plague, the present ultimately becomes a ‘prison house.’ This is attended by a recognition that ‘the order of the world is shaped by death’ (107-8). The world becomes devoid of “individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all [remains]” (138).

In spite of the shared emotions, the plague is a violence which silences people and breaks down communication as “each has to bear the load of his troubles alone” (64). Language, notes Rieux, becomes abstract – eventually only the most commonplace is exchanged, such as ‘hope this ends soon.’ The initial desire to express one’s anguish has

to make due with the language of ‘conventional emotion’ and thus any “reply always missed fire, and the attempt to communicate had to be given up” (64). Moreover, he notes that under such shared conditions, ‘sympathetic listeners’ tire. In short, each “had to be content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky” (63), that is, with a ‘sense of having been abandoned.’ A collective disaster, then, does not necessarily take us out of our sense of solitude. Indeed, it may serve to reinforce and exacerbate it.

*Abstraction and terror – On the general response of the citizens*

In the first section of *La Peste*, the narrator constantly adverts to the shared experience of disbelief – ‘this can’t happen here, now, there is no more plague’ – that is, to the denial of reality on the part of the citizens, the medical community and the government bureaucracy. During the initial phase of the plague, most are held in suspense by the comfort and safety of routine. Even though some members of the medical community, such as Rieux, are increasingly convinced that it is plague, there is a reluctance to ‘name’ the disaster. Indeed, the bureaucracy refuses to alert the population or to take it in hand without the phenomenon being definitively ‘named’ by the medical practitioners, thereby evading the need to make a decision. The slow acceptance of this reality is attended by the sentiment, ‘well, if so, it won’t last long’ and business continues as usual. At this point in the novel the first and only direct link between war and plague is noted by Rieux – that of our sense of disbelief in the actuality of disasters which shake the reality we construct for ourselves. Of this disbelief, Rieux notes that

[i]n this respect our townsfolk were like everybody else, wrapped up in themselves; in other words they were humanists; they disbelieved in pestilence. A pestilence isn’t a

thing made to man's measure; therefore we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. (34)

The reluctance to grant the disaster any weight could not have failed to echo for the readers who had just emerged from the war in Europe, the threat of which was initially grossly underestimated by the European leaders. It is also a critique of the truncated humanism of Modernity – that predicated upon a world reduced to man and his history as opposed to a more classical humanism which recognizes man's belonging to nature, that is, to that which is 'beyond man's measure.'

Rieux notes that 'after commerce died by plague,' there was a general sense of 'being on holiday.' As the death toll mounts, however, the recognition of the plague is measurable in terms of the rising terror and the attendant flattening of all emotion except that of fear. The initial feelings of resentment toward the plague and the anguish induced by separation from loved ones and from the routines which hold us, reach their peak with the onset of general panic. The sense of panic eventually gives way to despondency or lethargy and a 'sense of dereliction.' The terror is attended by the slow 'disembodiment of memory,' thus reducing people to silence as 'sentiment had become emptied of all personal content' and exchanges diminished to the commonplace (Maquet 78). Despair and indifference is the lot of some; others indulge in rounds of entertainment and riotous behavior; some partake in anarchic behavior, such as looting; there are 'those who rebel, whose idea is to break loose from the prison house;' the profiteers emerge as well; and some adapt "themselves to confinement and [carry] on their humdrum lives as before" (85).

The first death by plague occurs on April 30. In November of that same year, it reaches its highest peak and plateaus. The narrator notes that no one attended the cemetery on All Souls Day as the dead “were no longer the forsaken to whom, one day in the year, you came to justify yourself. They were intruders whom you would rather forget” (192). The terror induced by the plague is thus linked to the primordial fear of death made imminent in great catastrophes. This is supported by the structure of the novel which has five sections. In the third section, the narrator offers a summary of conditions at the end of the summer as the plague is reaching its peak. He presents a short narrative of what he refers to as the “excesses of the living, the burial of the dead, and the plight of separated lovers” (138). Structurally then, the centre of the novel concerns death. Rieux justifies his treatment of the degradation of the rituals of burial, which eventually end in mass cremations given the shortage of manpower and space, noting that “there is a terrible cogency in the self-evident; ultimately it breaks down all defences. How, for instance, continue to ignore the funerals on the day when somebody you love needed one?” (142) The breakdown of defences is precisely the collapse of all the structures which normally hold us – our routines, including the rituals which attend death; those whom we love and with whom we share our life; the social structures we collectively construct and sustain; and the activities with which we entertain ourselves. The situation of plague or war and the attendant collapse of these structures is our confrontation with death, which the experience of the absurd gives rise to personally as described in *Le Mythe*. The conditions in great catastrophes, conversely, render the absurd a collective tragedy.

War and plague are equally forms of imprisonment. So too is the experience of terror. The difference lies in their relative reality. War and plague are real situations, that is, they constitute the reality in which we exist. The terror they induce in us is equally real, but it is a state of mind and heart, a part of the situation but not its root which is, rather, the event that provokes it. Otherwise said, fear ‘exists’ in the heart and mind in response to the situation in which we find ourselves. The terror we experience gives rise to the attendant feelings of being entirely alone with it, cut off from our past, present and future. In short, it can reduce us to feeling like a hunted animal. The experience of terror, then, tends to abstract us from the very situation which induces it, thereby becoming the ‘situation’ as opposed to the reality which provokes it.

In his 1946 essay “Ni victimes ni bourreaux,” Camus notes that “the problem is that terror does not create a climate conducive to thinking. My view, however, is that rather than blame our fear, we should regard it as a basic element of the situation and try to remedy it” (259). The effort to take a slight distance from our fear is the only hope of resisting it. Camus notes in this same essay that “what we need to resist today is fear and silence and the division of the minds and souls these entail” (275). The first abstraction, ultimately, is within ourselves – what the ‘soul’ feels, terror and anguish, is initially denied by the mind in self-defence, thus instating a divide between what we know in our hearts and with our minds. This is the first and fatal abstraction from ‘the body,’ that is, from the whole of us – mind and soul. It should be noted that Camus’s notion of soul is, I believe, much like that of the Greek *psyche*, that is, that which animates any living being. As such, the divide between the soul or heart and mind is an abstraction from life and a



retreat to ‘the mind’ which is, considered in itself, only a function of this original abstraction from the feeling, thinking body in relation to the situation.

The analysis of terror in the 1946 essay is clearly echoed in the reaction of the citizens. The narrator notes that those whose courage and endurance finally failed and who therefore ‘refused to put up a fight were ill rewarded.’ He states that “they drifted through life rather than lived, the prey of aimless days and sterile memories, like wandering shadows that could have acquired substance only by consenting to root themselves in the solid earth of their distress” (61). The order of the world is death, claims Rieux and Camus. In abstracting ourselves from our situation, or more precisely from that which we cannot control and from the distress it induces in us, we ultimately succumb to terror and thereby become victims, silenced and condemned to solitude and to a slow wasting away of life.

*On the ways of resistance*

While charting the progress of the plague and the general reactions of the citizens, the narrator simultaneously witnesses to the resistance to the epidemic. The collective form of resistance begins with the formation of the sanitary squads at the suggestion of a character named Tarrou. With the death toll mounting, the authorities’ measures, such as evacuation of the sick and removal and burial of bodies, become increasingly ineffectual. In response to the situation, the squads are set up to assist doctors in the removal of the sick from their homes, as this was generally resisted. Rieux in fact refers to this resistance as an abstraction, that is, as a denial of what one knows to be real. The squads also establish more hospitals, set up isolation camps for those potentially affected and

help with burials. While there are clear echoes of the French resistance movement here, I suggest that it is not the analogue that interests Camus as much as a fleshing out of the movement of revolt, the analysis of which is undertaken in the 1945 essay. In drawing the characters, the personal aspect of revolt is revealed in the reasons for which each participant joins in the collective effort. Camus thereby effectively fleshes out the relationship of the personal, historical and metaphysical aspects of revolt which he discusses in his explanatory work.

Rieux notes that while there were those who argued the only thing to do was to ‘bow to the inevitable,’ those who fought were certain that ‘there must be no bowing down.’ He adds that whatever the reasons each had for joining in the collective revolt, they agreed that “[t]he essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation. And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical” (111). Rieux’s revolt began long before the plague in his choice of profession. In a conversation with Tarrou, he notes that he entered the medical profession for abstract reasons, the primary one being that it seemed a good choice for the son of a poor family. It was when he experienced the reality of death that his desire to be a doctor became concrete – his desire simply became to save those whom he could. Tarrou asks him why he is helping in the fight if he does not believe in God. In response, Rieux speaks of the order of the world being that of death and that he ‘fights creation as he finds it.’ While he knows there are no lasting victories, it does not warrant giving up the fight which, he says, has been taught him by suffering.

Prior to considering the reasons for which other characters enter the fight, a second major criticism of the novel, which concerns the ‘weakness’ of characterization, needs to be noted. This critique asserts that the characters on which the text focuses are underdeveloped and thus primarily act as ‘mouthpieces’ for various philosophical positions which Camus espouses. For instance, Lazere claims that the relationships developed between the main characters in the novel are drawn “impersonally, ideologically, at the expense of private bonds” (195). I think it more accurate to suggest that Camus expresses his convictions through the characters rather than ‘ideological positions.’ In his *Combat* editorials, he clearly states that ‘I have no positions, just a few basic principles.’ Arguably, this is reflected in his art where what he values comes to the fore. As Rieux notes, man is not an idea. The characters are sketched intensively as opposed to extensively, then, in an effort to consider the personal element in all revolt. In fact, in introducing someone who joins the squads, Rieux says, ‘one more way of resisting needs to be considered.’

As Camus notes in the 1945 essay, while the collective form of resistance is shaped by that which it opposes, the reasons for resistance are always personal. Why a person revolts may give rise to an ideological position, but in the first instance it is a movement of the heart. What Camus attempts to sketch in *La Peste* is, I suggest, precisely this inexpressible element or nodal point of each of the characters he develops. The details of any one of us are, on the whole, very much like the details of anyone else of the same generation, class and so forth. As such, an amassing of detail which a more extensive characterization affords, would not reveal the core event which gives shape to a

person and which moves her to revolt. I believe it is precisely this movement of the heart in revolt which interests Camus in this novel rather than the shape the revolt takes on the historical plane or the espousal of a 'position,' strictly speaking. Indeed, the focus on the personal reasons for revolt forms an integral part of the chronicle of 'the troubled, rebellious hearts of the townsfolk' (110). I will now briefly introduce the other members of the squad and their respective reasons for revolt.

Grand is a low ranking civil servant whose wife left him years earlier due to the quiescence of a love worn by time and poverty. He spends his evenings writing a novel, but the fifty pages of manuscript bear only one sentence tirelessly reworked in an effort to perfect it. He also desires to write his wife to tell her that he still loves her, but is equally unable to express himself with ease in this task. He is eventually infected with the plague which he unexpectedly survives. Prior to his recovery he starts a letter to his wife, telling Rieux that he now simply wants to let her know that he wishes her happiness. His part in the sanitary squads consists in accurately filling in the records, his forte. He joined, writes Rieux, in saying, "yes' without a moment's hesitation," and returned to the sentence on which he was working at the time. Rieux notes that if the story has a hero, it is "this insignificant and obscure hero who had to his credit only a little goodness of heart and a seemingly absurd ideal" (123). Grand joins, in fact, simply because the plague is a fact which must be addressed. The impetus for revolt in the case of Grand, then, is a sense of decency and personal responsibility.

Rambert is a Parisian journalist who visits Oran just prior to the outbreak to write an article about the Arabs. Caught by accident and cut off from the woman he loves, he

spends months trying to leave, first through official channels and finally through unofficial means. While waiting for arrangements to be finalized with the border guards who will be paid to let him through the gates, he joins the squads temporarily. A fighter in the Spanish Civil War on the part of the ‘losing side,’ he tells Rieux that he is not afraid of death. Rather, he has realized the futility of dying for an idea and now lives for love of this particular woman. This too is recognized as a way of resistance by Rieux who supports Rambert in his fight to leave Oran. Rieux notes that Rambert and others resist “the bondage closing in on them” (117) by trying “to recover their lost happiness” (117). He adds that “while their resistance lacked the active virtues of the other, it had (to the narrator’s thinking) its point, and moreover, it bore witness, even in its futility and incoherences, to a salutary pride” (117). It is, in short, Rambert’s way of ‘preventing the plague from besting him.’ Just as he is about to succeed in his effort to leave Oran, Rambert chooses to stay and fight on against the plague. Rieux tells him that “there [...] is] nothing shameful in preferring happiness” (170). Rambert replies, “[b]ut it may be shameful to be happy by oneself” (170). Here revolt is both personal and metaphysical – the ‘eternal unhappiness of the human condition’ is countered by its refusal.

Tarrou, a stranger who visits Oran from time to time, is as well imprisoned by the plague. He tells Rieux his story one evening when they take an ‘hour off from the fight.’ He opens his tale stating that ‘I had plague before I came here,’ which, he says is “tantamount to saying I’m like everybody else. Only there are some people who don’t know it, or feel at ease in that condition; others know, and want to get out of it. Personally, I’ve always wanted to get out of it” (201). For Tarrou, the plague is the

‘unreflective innocence’ in which he lived until a series of events led to an awakening. The son of a prosecutor, at the age of 17 he attends the court for the first time to witness his father in action. As his father asks for the death sentence for a small man with an ‘owl-like face,’ Tarrou sees ‘the defendant’ as ‘this man’ rather than as merely ‘the defendant.’ Disgusted with this power to sentence a man to death, he leaves home and joins a revolutionary group whose self-appointed task is to undermine the society that bases itself on the death sentence. The ‘few deaths’ required to achieve their end disturbs Tarrou, but it is not until he sees a man shot by a firing squad at close range that he leaves the group. He begins seriously to search for a ‘third way’ as he realizes that he ‘had the plague while thinking he was fighting it.’ His states that

on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it’s up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences. That may sound simple to the point of childishness; I can’t judge if it’s simple, but I know it’s true. (207)

However, he notes that this entails leaving it to others to make history. Again, what Tarrou discovers is that the idea he had of his own innocence was ‘unreflective.’ The violence that is part of all plagues is a part of each of us. He concludes that

what’s natural is the microbe – all the rest, integrity, health, purity (if you like) – is the product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who hardly infects anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. (207)

Given this awareness of the capacity to ‘infect others,’ he says that his code of behavior or ethics is one of ‘comprehension’ which precludes judging and thus entails the ‘way of sympathy.’ His quest has become, he says, to discover if one can be a saint without belief in God. Tarrou’s revolt, the most political of the four, bears witness to the tensions

involved in resistance and to an awareness of the intimate relationship between morality and politics.

In *L'Homme révolté*, Camus claims that “[a] character is never the author who created him. It is quite likely, however, that an author may be all his characters simultaneously” (37). Rather than the presentation of ideological positions, these four distinct reasons for revolt may reflect contradictions of the heart that Camus underwent during the war years. The characters would, then, represent various tensions Camus had to struggle with – the tension between a sense of duty and perhaps the desire for a ‘freer creation,’ that is, one which is not subjugated to the ‘problem of the hour;’ the collective fight to ‘save bodies’ as opposed to a desire for individual happiness; and the recognition of the need to undercut the cycle of victim and executioner of which he became acutely aware through the travesty of justice incurred during the purge in France. One last way of resistance must be considered prior to concluding this chapter – that inspired by the religious logic of Paneloux, an Augustinian Jesuit, which stands in juxtaposition to the characters whose movement of revolt is inspired by the ‘relative absolute value’ of man and by the ‘logic of existence.’

*On revolt: Wrenching love back from eternity*

Paneloux, a priest and respected scholar on Augustine and the African church, is introduced just before panic strikes the population. His first sermon is delivered during ‘the week of prayer’ which is implemented as a ‘battle against the plague.’ He presents the plague in terms of a radically orthodox interpretation of Augustine’s theodicy, dramatically opening his sermon with, “Calamity has come upon you, my brethren, and,

my brethren, you deserved it” (80). He concludes that the epidemic ‘points the way to truth and salvation,’ the ‘consolation’ of the plague being its ‘punishment of sins’ and a ‘call to the narrow path.’ As such, he exhorts his parishioners to “offer up to heaven that one prayer which is truly Christian, a prayer of love. And God would see to the rest” (84). Rieux writes of this sermon that ‘where some saw abstraction, others saw truth.’ With the juxtaposition of the plague as ‘abstraction’ and ‘truth,’ Camus both indicates and indicts the Augustinian theodicy as another type of abstraction. It is, in his view, an instance of ‘explanation after the fact’ or ‘metaphysics as myth.’ In short, it is a divorce from the given.

Paneloux’s Augustinian outlook crumbles upon witnessing the death throes of a child throughout the night, with Rieux and company in attendance. Subsequent to this he joins the squads working on the ‘front line in the hospitals.’ He also delivers a second sermon, this time inspired by a Kierkegaardian theology of love and the absurd. Whereas in his first talk, Paneloux had used solely the second person plural, as quoted above, in the second sermon he uses the third person plural, thereby indicating a change of heart. No longer is he ‘exempt’ from the visitation. Rather, he suffers the absurd alongside the citizens. And rather than ‘explaining the plague,’ he attempts to determine what it might teach. He asserts that “we all [are] up against the wall that plague had built around us, and in its lethal shadow we must work out our salvation” (183). He adds that he “refused to have recourse to simple devices enabling him to scale that wall” (183) such as the ‘promise of eternal bliss.’ He makes reference to the death of a child which ‘is humiliating to the heart and mind’ and holds that ‘we must accept this humiliation’



without understanding it. Instead, he speaks of the ‘all or nothing’ entailed in faith, which he holds consists in either a complete surrender of one’s will to that of God’s or in a refusal to believe. In short, ‘the choice one must make is to love God or hate him.’ Tarrou interprets the sermon as the choice between losing faith or ‘consenting to die with others’ (187). Paneloux chooses the latter way, both in his work with the squads and when he contracts ‘plague-like’ symptoms. In the latter case, he refuses to call a doctor as he believes it would contradict his faith and he chooses to die without the comfort of company for the same reason. Upon noting Paneloux’s choice, Rieux writes that ‘the reader will judge for himself.’ As Rieux, like Camus, self-avowedly lives outside of grace, the value of such a decision is left to the reader to decide. Camus does, however, present an alternate way of seeing – one which recognizes the limited condition of the creature and its implications.

The heart of *La Peste* may well be contained in the conversation between Rieux and Paneloux which immediately follows the death of the child which they witness together. Rieux turns on Paneloux in anger, telling him that “that child, anyhow, was innocent – and you know it as well as I do!” (177) Paneloux responds with what will form the core of his second sermon. He says to Rieux that “[t]hat sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand” (178). Rieux professes ‘a very different understanding of love’ and asserts that he will always revolt against an order in which ‘children are put to torture.’ Whereas Paneloux speaks of them both working for man’s salvation, Rieux asserts that his concern is solely ‘with man’s health.’ He claims that “[w]e’re working side by side for something

that unites us – beyond blasphemy and prayers. And it's the only thing that matters” (178).

Through this relationship, Camus juxtaposes the love of the Absolute and the love of man for man. At the end of the novel when the gates are opened and the time of separation ends, Rieux writes that “[t]hose who, clinging to their little own, had set their hearts solely on returning to the home of their love, had sometimes their reward – though some of them were still walking the streets alone, without the one they had waited” (244). Alternatively, “for those who aspired beyond and above the human individual towards something they could not even imagine, there had been no answer” (244). By example, Rieux refers solely to Tarrou’s search for peace which he finds only in death by plague. However, the love of the Absolute is implicit as he offsets Tarrou’s quest with that of the love for a person. Rieux concludes that human love is ‘something we can ask for as it depends solely on us.’

Camus also considers the notion of unity in *La Peste*, a concept central to the analysis of the absurd in *Le Mythe*. In a notebook entry in late 1942 Camus writes,

*Development of the absurd.*

- (1) if the fundamental concern is the need for unity;
- (2) if the world (or God) cannot satisfy this.

Man must make a unity for himself, either by turning away from the world or within the world. This restores both an ethic and an austere rule of life, which still have to be defined. (NB/42: 26)

In *La Peste*, he offsets the nostalgia for both a lost homeland and for an absolute sense of unity against the relative unity of the creature. This is addressed in Rieux’s reflections on the experience of separation and reunion of the townsfolk who recognize the homeland and unity they did have through its disruption. It is against the limited unity we do in fact

have, that of the circle of loved ones and of the community of men, that Camus implicitly addresses the abstractive nature of the absolute unity we tend to seek at the cost of the unity we share. More specifically, this notion of a concrete unity stands in juxtaposition to the Christian notion that the unity of man is established through the love of God before whom each stands alone.

Paneloux's first sermon is representative of that which explained plague and social evil for centuries. It failed both in fictional Oran and in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *The Plague: Fiction and Resistance*, Kellman notes that the two sermons, which appear in parts two and four of the five part novel, are "like twin pillars sustaining the entire edifice."<sup>64</sup> By the time Paneloux delivers his second sermon on the love of God, the edifice had crumbled already just as it had during the wars in the West where the absurd had become a collective reality. When the final solution, be it the revolutionary ideal adopted and rejected by Tarrou or the Christian love of an order 'in which the innocent are put to torture,' obscures the given, the realm of abstraction has been entered. These 'explanations' are, according to Camus, metaphysics become myth as each requires faith (NB/42: 78). Man thus becomes an idea – the man of the future will be happy or each will be born into another life. The living man thereby becomes an abstraction and allegiance to an idea often becomes more important than flesh and blood.

In *La Peste*, Camus contrasts such leaps with the love of the creature via the more modest means of the way of sympathy, duty, decency and saving what is held to be more

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<sup>64</sup> Steven G. Kellman, *The Plague: Fiction and Resistance* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 56.

important than the idea of a future man or life. Throughout the novel various characters note that the plague is everybody's business. Camus thereby indicates in very simple terms what I believe he understands as our 'task' – the love of the community of flesh and blood as opposed to that for an absolute be it religious or political. At the close of the novel, Rieux writes of himself that "following the dictates of his heart, he has deliberately taken the victims' side and tried to share with his fellow-citizens the only certitudes they had in common – love, exile and suffering" (246). *La Peste* clearly echoes the desire Camus speaks of in *Le Mythe*. There he writes, "I want to liberate my universe of its phantoms and to people it solely with flesh and blood truths whose presence I cannot deny" (93).

What Camus descriptively renders in this novel is the closed circle of existence. Again, on the level of structure the novel ends by returning to the beginning. In the first section of *La Peste*, the narrator speaks of the initially shared disbelief in the possibility of plague, that is, of the refusal of reality. Just prior to the end of the plague, when it is clearly waning, the townsfolk begin to speak of 'starting fresh' and "of the new order of life that would set in after the plague" (218). Yet shortly after the official declaration of the end of the plague, which marks the closing of the chronicle, Rieux writes that "everyone was out and about to celebrate those crowded moments when the time of the ordeal ended and the time of forgetting had not yet begun" (241). He also notes that "people calmly denied that we were part of the population that went up in smoke or waited their turn to be condemned" (242). Of Rambert, whose lover arrives from Paris, he writes that "[f]or the moment, he wished to behave like all those others round him

who believed, or made-believe, that plague can come and go without changing anything in men's hearts" (241). Recall that it is precisely 'the change of heart' in those who had just come out of ten years of war which Camus addresses in his 1946 essay "Ni victimes ni bourreaux." Even though the war had ended, traces are left on the hearts of all which, if unattended, continue to inspire the fear which was the lot of all Europeans during the war, just as it was of those who underwent the plague.

The 'inevitable time of forgetting' clearly alludes to the inevitable resumption of habits and structures, that is, of the return to business as usual. This is another type of denial of reality. But just as in the personal experience of the absurd, we are only too happy to resume life again as soon as possible, if possible. On the death of Tarrou, with whom he had become intimate, Rieux wonders what he himself 'has won.' He writes,

no more than the experience of having known plague and remembering it, of having known friendship and remembering it, of knowing affection and being destined one day to remember it. So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories. (236-7)

Knowledge and memory are, in effect, another form of resistance. It works against our natural desire and real need to forget both personal and collective tragedies when they have apparently come to a close. Again, by focusing on the shared experience of terror and the emotions which attend it in *La Peste*, as opposed to the actual events which inspired it, I suggest Camus is attempting to evince in the reader the lived memory of those years. The novel, then, is an act of resistance to the 'inevitability of forgetting' and the need to believe or make-believe "that plague can come and go without changing anything in men's hearts" (241).

The novel closes with Rieux's note that the plague can lie dormant for years, which returns us to the beginning of *La Peste*. Again, the plague is ascribed one meaning – it is 'the same thing, over and over again' (135). As such, and as Camus argues in his essay "Remarque sur la révolte," there is a need for constant revolt as the 'idea of man' which is to be saved is never achieved once and for all.

*La Peste* is, then, a literal image of the closed circle of existence. By using a natural disaster, that is, that which is beyond the measure of man, Camus comes closer to the notion of existence in general than he could have done with a direct treatment of 'social evil.' Death and our fear of it are the common denominators between war and plague. Death is the original reign of terror against which we defend ourselves through all acts of abstraction, be it the personal divide of heart and mind, the routines we establish in order to forget, or the ideological defences we build collectively. In the case of man-made disasters such as war, there are, or better, the claim that there are 'winners and losers.' Events appear to be circumscribed by time, with a start and end date. As such, it is easy to succumb to the illusion of having a degree of control over the absurd or the irrational 'after' the debacle 'ends.' Conversely, a natural disaster brings home more clearly the primordial terror that belongs to all of us and the knowledge that we will all lose.

Our responses to plague and war are also the same at root despite the moral dilemmas which attend man-made disasters. We can succumb to the terror, revolt or become complicit with the violence, such as the character Cottard chooses to do in *La Peste*. Cottard, a criminal sought by the police for unidentified crimes committed before

the outbreak of plague, flowers during the epidemic as the authorities are too busy to deal with cases such as his. Cut off from people before the plague due to fear and distrust, Cottard feels himself at home in the condition now suffered by all as he is no longer alone with his suffering. Tarrou, whose path is that of sympathy, says at a point that Cottard's "only crime is that of having in his heart approved of something that killed off men, women, and children. I can understand the rest, but for that I am obliged to pardon him" (247). And Rieux, who ends the chronicle with a reference to the fate of Cottard after the plague, refers to him as that man "who had an ignorant, that is to say, lonely heart" (247). Despair of our condition and the anguish and fear it creates can unleash the violence that is a capacity of us all. This too is a possible response to the primordial fear of death and the source of the 'enemy attitude' discussed in the "Lettres à un ami Allemand" which opens the cycle on the rebel.

The alternative, Camus suggests, is revolt against the human condition which consists in the tension maintained between the individual and the situation in which she finds herself. In revolt, a movement of love, the first truth is discovered – that we are not alone. Camus argues that "we can aspire [collectively] to do battle within the historical arena in order to save from history that part of man which does not belong to history" (Combat 275). And in a notebook entry of January 15, 1943, Camus writes:

To regenerate love in an absurd world is to regenerate the most burning and the most perishable of human feelings... But no value judgment can be made between a love that endures (on this earth) and one that does not. A faithful love – *if it does not impoverish itself* – is one way for man to maintain in the highest manner the best part of himself. This is how faithfulness recovers its value. But this love lies outside anything eternal. It is the most human of feelings with all the implications of limits and delights that this word contains. This is why man realizes himself only through love, because it contains in brilliantly shining form the image of his futureless

condition (and not, as the idealists say, because it approaches a certain form of eternity)... All this is an illustration of the fact that absurdity can be defined by the opposition between *what lasts* and *what does not*. It being understood that there is only one way to last and that is eternally and there is no middle way. We belong to the world which does not last. And everything which does not last – and only that – is ours. What we must then do is wrench love back from eternity or at least from those who disguise it as an image of eternity. (NB/42: 36-7)

In witnessing to a love of the living dying body, it is possible that *La Peste* concerns precisely this ‘wrenching love back from eternity or at least from those who disguise it as an image of eternity.’ As does his text *L’Homme révolté*, in which Camus undertakes a genealogy of the condition of nihilism reached in the West by the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## Chapter 4

### *On the historical context of man in revolt: An introduction to L'Homme révolté*

In one of his first notebook entries, Camus notes that “writing in cycles is like nature, suffering, fruit, cycle” (NB/35: 6). *L'Homme révolté* is the fruit of his second cycle of approximately ten years.<sup>65</sup> As discussed in the last chapter, Camus felt he had advanced a step beyond the impasse resulting from an absurd reasoning in the discovery of a value, in the midst of nihilism, through the experience of revolt. In this movement an ‘essential dimension of man’ is revealed, that of the irreducible element in man. Through this, man is able to recognize himself as belonging to the natural community of men. It is, in short, the recognition of a common nature. Importantly, it is a value which arises ‘outside of eternity’ as it is discovered in the irreducible part of man which is itself in turn “that part of man which does not belong to history” (Combat 275). Finally, it is also ‘before reason,’ that is, it is a pre-reflective value in the first instance as it arises in and through a visceral response to oppression. In *L'Homme révolté* Camus considers this value further, in large part through an examination of its eclipse in the history of the West. As this value arises in the movement of revolt, he uses the notion of rebellion as a prism through which he reads the history of the West’s descent into nihilism both in an attempt to shed some light on the convulsions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in order to find a

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<sup>65</sup> Sherman aptly points out that the title ‘L'Homme révolté’ “is not particularly well captured by the translation “The Rebel”” (138). He argues that it does not express the (felicitous) ambiguity of the French title off of which Camus was no doubt playing. In light of this, it is better translated as either ‘Man in Revolt’ or ‘Revolted Man.’ In this chapter, I intend that the title ‘L'Homme révolté’ be read as ‘man in revolt,’ that is, in terms of the genuine revolt of the rebel. In the chapter on *La Chute*, I have in mind the translation ‘revolted man,’ “which suggests a man who is revolted by the cynical misappropriation of this impulse [of genuine revolt]” (138).

way forward. And in this text, as in nature, Camus returns to the roots of his work – to the tragic awareness of existence as described in his early lyrical essays and to his thesis on Augustine’s synthesis of Neo-Platonism and evangelical Christianity. Indeed, *L’Homme révolté* opens with the latter and closes with the former.

In a notebook entry of January 1951, Camus writes, “Revise the transition from Hellenism to Christianity, the genuine and sole turning point in history...” (NB/42: 176). Accordingly, *L’Homme révolté* opens with a brief recapitulation of the Greek worldview, evangelical Christianity and Gnosticism, as did his 1936 thesis. While he does not address the Christian era directly in *L’Homme révolté*, he does argue that Modernity is a culmination of this sole turning point in history which entailed a break with ‘the mythic conception of the world.’ The bulk of *L’Homme révolté* consists in tracing the effects of this break which is, according to Camus, the “[o]rigins of this modern lunacy. It was Christianity that turned man away from the *world*. It reduced him to himself and to his history. Communism is the logical consequence of Christianity. It’s a Christian kind of business” (NB/42: 83). Otherwise said, he examines what he perceives as the fruit of Augustine’s metaphysics through an analysis of the intellectual history and political revolutions of the West from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Finally, he closes *L’Homme révolté* with a return to the lyrical, which echoes Camus’s April 1948 notebook entry: “If, to outgrow nihilism, one must return to Christianity, one may well follow the impulse and outgrow Christianity in Hellenism” (NB/42: 183). In this last and shortest section of his text he briefly addresses the possibility of a renaissance of Western culture, in the service of which this essay is undertaken.

The guiding insight of *L'Homme révolté* is that the “delicate equilibrium between humanity and nature, man’s consent to the world, which gives ancient thought its distinction and refulgence, was first shattered for the benefit of history by Christianity” (190).<sup>66</sup> Nature becomes a ‘backdrop’ for the history of the drama of the soul as it makes its way toward God. In its break with the mythic conception of the world, the metaphysics of the Incarnation as developed by Augustine gives birth to a new civilization. Once again, in the 1945 essay, Camus writes about the two worlds possible for man – the sacred world and that of revolt. With the passing of the sacred, the world of revolt arises. *L'Homme révolté* concerns just this passage from the sacred world of the Christian West to that of Modernity. While the transition described by Camus bears a resemblance to the secularization theory of Löwith *et. al.*, Camus does not remain within the terms of the sacred and the secular as these terms are dependent upon each other. Instead, he uses the prism of revolt and revolution. The attempt at a definitive revolution by Christianity, like every revolution, gives birth to an oppositional movement. In opposition to the sacred world of the Christian era, the metaphysical rebellions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers inaugurate the world of revolt, however ‘uncanny’ its appearance.

On Camus’s reading, Christianity’s emphasis on the soul’s history is developed in divorce from man’s relationship to nature. The City of God is the goal of the soul in opposition to the world, which in Augustine’s metaphysics is understood in terms of the City of Man. The world of sea, sun and rock is eclipsed by a world now understood

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<sup>66</sup> As this part of the chapter focuses on *L'Homme révolté*, references will be cited simply by page number in the body of the paper. Elsewhere it is identified in the body of the text by R.

primarily in terms of history and man's nature is understood as that which is to be transformed by will and grace. With the advent of Modernity, the emphasis on history is increasingly radicalized. Camus asserts that "history is distinguished from nature precisely because it transforms science and passion by means of the will" (198). Nature, a backdrop in Christianity for the history of the soul's journey, becomes in Modernity solely that which is to be transformed. With the correlative reduction of man to history there arises the certainty of the "infinite malleability of man and the negation of human nature" (237). By the end of Modernity, then, man and the natural world are reduced to objects. However, the reign of grace, contested by the reign of justice in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, first results in the divinization of man. The salvation of man thereby becomes the task of man. Finally, Modernity closes with the deification of history in the Communist Revolution during which those able to read history constitute a new priesthood. Otherwise said, Modernity evolves into a new form of Gnosticism with a 'hideous' resemblance to the sacred world against which it revolts.

In effect, what Camus traces in *L'Homme révolté* is the slow disembodiment of European thought and the attendant descent into nihilism. Once again, in a notebook entry written sometime between November 1945 and October 1946, Camus proclaims,

[a]fter 2000 years of Christianity, the revolt of the body. It has taken two thousand years for us once again to be able to show it naked on the beaches. Hence the excess. And it has recovered its place in our customs. What we now have to do is to restore its place in philosophy and metaphysics. This is one of the meanings of the modern convulsion. (NB/42: 84)

I suggest that *L'Homme révolté* is Camus's attempt to recover the body, that is, 'to restore its place in philosophy and metaphysics' after its long eclipse. Thus the roots of

his thought, the lyrical essays and his thesis, are present in the fruit of his second cycle as well.

*Revolt of the ancients*

Camus opens *L'Homme révolté* with a description of the rebel slave who, like the functionary of the 1945 essay, revolts against the oppressor in the recognition of a value which entails both master and slave – that of the irreducible part of man which requires the community of men to be comprised. Rebelling against the condition of slavery, the slave in his turn may overstep the value which limits oppressor and oppressed through a desire to become master. At this point, he oversteps the limits of rebellion itself. Camus juxtaposes to this experience of revolt that of metaphysical rebellion in which a man revolts against the human condition and the universe. This notion of rebellion begins with 18<sup>th</sup> century Western thought, though the ancients, claims Camus, were not unfamiliar with metaphysical rebellion as is inscribed in the myth of Prometheus. Prometheus, however, rebels only against the gods in the name of man, not against nature, that is, against the universe. In the Greek understanding of the world, ‘to rebel against nature would be to rebel against oneself.’ Camus asserts that “the ancients, even though they believed in destiny, believed primarily in nature, in which they participated wholeheartedly” (27). Revolt against the gods who were part of the universe rather than over and against it as creators, was an opposition of two competing ideas of the good, not a ‘Manichean struggle’ between good and evil, innocence and guilt. Both the gods and man had their reasons and thus for the Greeks, metaphysical rebellion had its limits. While a Greek hero such as Prometheus might well have aspired to be a god, it was to

exist with the gods, not an attempt to depose them (31). Indeed, in the mythic conception of the world, “if Prometheus suffered, it is because he overstepped his nature as a man” (Dis 122).

Metaphysical rebellion against the universe, writes Camus, “presupposes a simplified view of creation – which was inconceivable to the Greeks” (28). As opposed to “gods on one side and men on the other, [there was] a series of stages leading from one to the other” (28). Camus asserts that rebellion

can only be imagined in terms of opposition to someone. The only thing that gives meaning to human protest is the idea of a personal god who has created, and is therefore responsible for, everything. And so we can say, without being paradoxical, that in the Western World the history of rebellion is inseparable from the history of Christianity. (28)

In Camus’s view, during the decline of Hellenism the modern notion of metaphysical rebellion begins to take shape with transitional thinkers such as Epicurus and Lucretius, whom Camus refers to as disciples of Prometheus. However, rather than contesting the gods, he claims that Epicurus barricades himself against the silence of the gods with his own silence toward them. And Lucretius, like Epicurus, “refuses to accept any explanatory principle that cannot be tested by the senses” (30). Rather than contest the universal death sentence in the hope of salvation, these thinkers argue that the only immortality is an ‘immortal death,’ thus robbing the gods of their ability to torment men. All metaphysical revolt is against death according to Camus. As such, in their revolt against it, these transitional thinkers erect ‘the ramparts of the mind’ through a slow abstraction from sensibility, ‘the primary manifestation of it being hope’ (29).

It is with the introduction of the God of the Old Testament into the Mediterranean world that ‘the current drama of the West begins.’ In Judaism, however, while an abyss exists between the God of history and human suffering, the kingdom to come for the Jews is a terrestrial one. The real break with the ancient world begins with the Christian transformation of the terms of the relation between God and man and the understanding of the kingdom as spiritual. I will first briefly consider Camus’s interpretation of Christ and the original Christian community, which he understands in terms of rebellion, followed by a consideration of certain key elements in the revolution founded upon it.

#### *Christ’s rebellion*

Camus was self-avowedly neither a Christian nor an atheist. In a notebook entry he writes, ‘the secret of my universe – God without eternity.’ He speaks instead of ‘a sense of the sacred’ (LCE 364) and in *La Peste*, in the description of treeless, soulless Oran, ‘a modern city like any other,’ he notes that the citizens lived without any ‘intimation of something different’ (P 6). He also claims in November 1954 that “I often read that I am atheistic; I hear people speak of my atheism. Yet these words say nothing to me; for me they have no meaning. I do not believe in God *and* I am not an atheist” (NB/51: 112). In terms of the Christian heritage of the West, Camus is a stranger. As he notes, he lives outside of grace, by which he means Christianity, and he writes for those who also live outside of grace. Of believers he was generally respectful, however. In a speech made at the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Marbourg in 1948, he states that he does not feel that he possesses ‘any absolute truth or any message’ and that he never starts from “the supposition that Christian truth is illusory, but merely from the fact that

[he] could not accept it” (RRD 69-70). However, Camus did take history seriously – both intellectual history and that of his times. Again, in his 1957 lecture entitled “Create Dangerously,” he states that “there is no culture without legacy, and we cannot and must not reject anything of ours, the legacy of the West” (RRD 270). His concern is not with the Christian faith, then, but with what he refers to as ‘historical Christianity’ and its effects upon the cultural formation of the West. For example, at a point he writes that ‘the executioners of the Inquisition had no right to be called Christians’ (RRD 158). Thus it is the historical inheritance which he examines through the prism of revolt as opposed to the question of faith.

As Camus notes at the end of his thesis, “to restore the profound originality of the Gospel seems to be an impossible task” (Dis 152). At stake in Camus’s analysis is the acute awareness of death that marked this community which he asserts is “the sole example of a collective experience of death” (Dis 99). This awareness, according to Camus, is “the triumph of the flesh, the terror the body feels at this revolting conclusion” (Dis 99). Again, with Pascal, Camus claims that it is precisely our unwillingness to consider our mortality or “the wretchedness of pain of the human condition” that evangelical Christianity fought against. Indeed, its “whole task is to combat this idleness of heart” (Dis 152). As noted above, metaphysical revolt is always at root a revolt against death. As such, revolt is visceral in the first instance. Genuine rebellion, as opposed to a nihilistic one, recognizes both terms of revolt – the love of life and its limit which is our common destiny. In a nihilistic revolt one of the limits is refused and thus revolt itself is



overstepped. It thereby results in either acquiescence with the felt injustice of the universal death sentence or the absolute refusal of the limited condition of the creature.

In spite of the early evangelical community's collective experience of death, in a lecture delivered in Athens in 1955 entitled "On the Future of Tragedy," Camus asserts that Christ's passion is the sole tragic moment in Christianity. What follows this moment is the beginning of the Christian drama where the end is known in advance and "the person and death of Christ... become an abstraction or a symbol" (Dis 99). The 'ambiguity of the tragic' is lost, claims Camus, when "Christianity plunges the whole of the universe, man and the world, into the divine order"<sup>67</sup> such that this order "cannot be called into question and admits only sin and repentance" (Tragedy 303). In contrast, Christ's faith in life and his absolute despair of it are exemplified in his crying out in a moment of doubt to the one whom he believed had abandoned him (61). Had Christ not felt the real anguish of being abandoned, had he been assured that this was not the end, it would have been a refusal of life which entails death and thus of faith, 'the primitive foundation of which is the belief in life' (66). According to Camus, Christ's 'fleeting doubt' which issues in a protest against God, is precisely this calling of the 'divine order into question,' thereby 'consecrating the ambiguity of a tragic situation' (Tragedy 303). In his revolt, Christ denies neither life nor the creator against whom he protests as still he calls out to him even while feeling abandoned. It was thus the rare acceptance of the limited condition of the creature, that is, of our living reality.

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<sup>67</sup> Albert Camus, "On the Future of Tragedy," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 295-310. This quote on tragedy is found on p. 303. Hereafter cited in the body of the text as Tragedy.

*The Christian revolution*

Camus claims that believers and rebels dream of unity (233) and that our sense of solidarity, that is, of community, is founded by both rebellion and religion (22). Through the experience of our common nature to which rebellion gives rise, and the consequent awareness that we are not alone, the conditions for dialogue are created and so too the possibility of something new emerging. The answers are not given in advance. Indeed, the questions relate to what is immediately present and the answers address what is needed at the time. I suggest that Camus understands Christ's ministry largely in these terms and in light of the description of Jesus in *L'Homme révolté* which he attributes to Nietzsche. The irreducible element in man is, of course, understood by Christ through his culture. His lessons were the love of each other as brothers as we are all the children of God; attention to the oppressed; "that the sins of nature are unimportant" (69); and the admonition not to judge others and of forgiveness of the self.

Immediately following the death of Christ, his life and death begin to be interpreted by the community they constitute. In Camus's view, the Gospels break with Judaism in declaring that the kingdom of God is spiritual as opposed to terrestrial and that it is attained only through the renunciation of this world. He also asserts that the New Testament 'softens the God of history of the Old Testament,' with the interpretation of Christ as an intercessor between God and man (32). He identifies the notion of mediation as the Greek element in Christianity. The man-god, in whom 'the divine and flesh meet,' suffers the agony on the cross absolutely without the comfort of the promise of eternity. The gap between the heavens and earth is thereby mediated by a God who

enters into history and takes on the despair of man. Christ's innocent suffering and resurrection henceforth announce immortality and thereby justice in the promise of eternity in the Kingdom of God. Importantly, Camus asserts that "[e]vil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to Him since He suffers and dies" (32). And because the innocent Christ 'suffers voluntarily,' the injustice of human suffering is 'justified' (34) or at the very least 'relativized' (210). It is thus a religion of pessimism and hope, writes Camus – pessimism as regards the impossibility of sin, which is linked with 'man's nature' (69), and as such a pessimism with regard to this world as well; and hope, as history has a meaning given by God (Dis 100-102).

The beliefs of this early community become dogma in Augustine's metaphysics of the Incarnation, thereby giving 'answers' to questions concerning evil and death (32). Indeed, according to Camus, "no doctrine has ever accorded to the irreducible element in man such a weight of explanation" (Dis 122). This is the beginning of the Christian revolution and, he argues, an overstepping of Christ's rebellion. Camus asserts that the postulates of the resurrection and the Kingdom of God as 'the promise of eternal life' render Christ's metaphysical rebellion futile (21). In short, Christ's concern with the well-being of the community and with men grappling with their common destiny is overstepped when his life and death are rendered in terms of a metaphysics, that is, as 'explanation.'

According to Camus, the sense of solidarity or unity which arises in Christ's rebellion gives way to the notion of 'human totality' in the Christian revolution as God gives a meaning to the whole of history (69; 193). And morality understood in terms of

reward and punishment at the end of time serves to elevate the dimension of history over that of nature. The association of sin with man's nature, in particular with 'the body,' leads to a desire to escape our nature as well. As noted above, perfection of our nature on the Christian view is linked with the transformation of our passions through will and grace. Given the absolute quality of the final judgment, innocence and guilt become absolutes. And in light of the crucifixion of absolute innocence that the death of Christ comes to represent, absolute guilt becomes the lot of man. Death itself is understood as punishment, which implies both an original guilt and the inability not to sin except through the grace of God which is entirely gratuitous. As man's intentions and actions count for nothing, the nothingness of man in relation to the absolute is enshrined in this metaphysics. It implies the absolute dependence of man on God.

A religion which is founded upon the body of Christ whose message was one of forgiveness becomes, in the absolute, a religion of guilt which is largely associated with our bodily nature. This is a strange transformation of Christ's rebellion which concerns the love of the creature by the creature just as God loves us. The worldly focus of Christ becomes otherworldly in the metaphysics of the Incarnation, wherein the striving of the soul for God becomes the aim and absolute submission the means. On Camus's view, the tension maintained by Christ between the *yes* and the *no* is that of the rebel's – it is an affirmation of life and simultaneously a cry against the injustice of the universe. As nothing is excluded in his agony, it is an acceptance of creaturehood. Conversely, the metaphysics of the Incarnation entails the renunciation of this world and life in the 'hope of another which one must deserve.' On Camus's view, this is a betrayal of life (MS 15).

The Christian revolution thereby oversteps genuine rebellion and so too the condition of the creature when the love of eternity replaces that of the creature.

*Christian metaphysics and Modernity*

Camus claims that at stake in the birth of a new civilization are shifts on the emotional plane, not merely changes in systems of thought, and that the shift in sensibility from that of the ‘Greek man’ to the ‘Christian’ is profound. According to Camus, for the ancients, ‘the world is their kingdom.’ Nature, eternal and necessary, is harmonious and coherent and thus intelligible. Given the Greeks’ rational conception of life, moral evil is understood as a function of ignorance or error and thus virtue can be learned (Dis 94). Unlike the absolute rationalism of Modernity, the Greek conception of the rational admits of the irrational. The whole man consists in reason and passion, dark and light. Thus, while the aim of the ancients was ‘to perfect one’s nature, not to escape from it’ (Dis 94-6), perfection was not thought of in absolute but relative terms. Rather than overcoming or suppressing the passions, it was a matter of the right ordering of reason and passion. In juxtaposition to this, the Christian sensibility is centred on the problem of evil, an acute awareness of the body and a fear of death. Again, for the evangelical community, the gap between the god of history and man, which resulted in their feeling that man is nothing and incapable of doing the good, was ameliorated by the ‘man-god.’ Camus asserts that for the early community, the resurrection was a ‘fact’ as opposed to a rational truth and that this fact is what is original to Christianity. The imminent redemption of man through Christ can be considered as a ‘fact of love’ for this community, then, which therefore required neither reasons nor proof.

Augustine, however – “Greek in his need for coherence, Christian in the anxieties to which his sensibility gave rise” (Dis 142) – instates what Camus refers to as the ‘second revelation,’ that of “a Christian metaphysic in the wake of evangelical faith” (Dis 150). In fusing evangelical Christianity and Greek metaphysics, Augustine universalizes what was a ‘fact’ in the religious thought of the early Christian community and renders it a ‘truth.’ For the Greeks, the intimation of unity and order, and thus of intelligibility and truth, is found in the contemplation of the beauty of the world. In Augustine’s metaphysics, which sets “the Incarnation over and against Contemplation” (Dis 142), the principle of unity is no longer found in the world but in a transcendent God who ascribes a meaning to man and the world on the plane of (sacred) history. On this view, the world becomes “merely the physical symbol of this striving toward God” (Dis 101). The ancient unity of truth and beauty discovered in the contemplation of nature, to which Camus testifies in his early lyrical essays, is thereby disrupted. Christianity, claims Camus, “separates Reason from Beauty, the True from the Beautiful, [and] Reason becomes merely the arbiter in questions of logic” (Dis 126). A gap is thereby introduced between sensibility and intelligibility. Otherwise said, ‘the ramparts of the mind’ were slowly erected.

Again, in the conclusion of his dissertation, Camus notes that

when Saint Augustine died, Christianity had become a philosophy. It is now sufficiently armed to resist the torment where everything founders, [that is, on our recognition of our mortality]. For many years now it has remained the only hope and the only real shield against the misfortune of the Western world. In this way Christianity won its Catholicity. (Dis 152)

The Christian belief in the immortality of the soul, promised in the resurrection of Christ, is of course the source of hope. Mortality, though, is not solely the ‘misfortune of the West.’ It is our common destiny. By the ‘misfortune of the Western world,’ then, I suggest Camus intends precisely man’s divorce from nature, and thus from the body, upon which the metaphysics of the Incarnation is predicated. Again, as Archambault notes, “in giving infinite value to the soul in its fight with nature, Christianity ruptured the original unity of body/soul” (Archambault 215). As long as the Christian worldview instated by this metaphysics held, the West was shielded from the effects of its abstraction from nature – both from that of the world and our own – and from the correlative elevation of the plane of history to an absolute. In Modernity, with nature being completely reduced to that which is to be transformed and with the general disbelief in God’s providence, all that remains is history, that is, pure flux. For the Greeks, while nature entailed the principle of change or flux, it was simultaneously understood as both eternal and necessary. As for the Christian era, while the metaphysics of the Incarnation shifted to the plane of (sacred) history, Camus asserts that “Christianity at least referred to a spiritual nature, and therefore maintained a certain fixity” (LCE 151). With the advent of Modernity and the eventual ‘murder of God,’ however, “all that remains are history and power” (LCE 151) which, Camus claims, is merely the continuation of ‘the drama that begins with the end of the ancient world’ (102).

*On Modernity’s metaphysical rebellion*

According to Camus, Modernity begins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the resurgence of the primordial fear of death and the sense of injustice it inspires. Thus, in *L’Homme*

*révolté*, his interest in the modern revolutions, both the French and Communist, concerns the ideological element, that is, the metaphysical rebellion against death as opposed to the social and economic causes of the revolutions.<sup>68</sup> He asserts that “from the moment when Christianity, emerging from its period of triumph, found itself submitted to the eye of critical reason – to the point where the divinity of Christ was denied – suffering once more became the lot of man” (34). With the attenuation of faith in the justice of God, the face of the ‘god of death’ reappears. Thus, the metaphysical rebellion of the West opens with a sense of ‘outraged innocence’ in the face of the universal death sentence. In contesting the morality of creator, the reign of grace is initially replaced with the reign of Reason and the rule of a transcendent God with that of man whose task is to instate a reign of justice. By the time of the Communist Revolution, the reign of Reason gives way to the providence of History and to the service of the ‘future man.’ Both revolutions are predicated on the demand for absolute justice, however. Indeed, Camus asserts that the Communist Revolution which follows the French is the continuation of the latter (195) and “only the contradictory climax of an old one” (272). In contrast, the despair of justice is met by the demand for absolute freedom by Sade and the movement his rebellion ultimately inspires – that of Fascism.

Reacting to the political revolution inspired by Rousseau, and carried out by St. Just in the name of Reason and the confidence in the morality of man, the prisoner Sade dreams of absolute freedom. Camus claims that he “denies man and his morality because God denies them” (38), which Sade deduces “from the history of religions” (37). In light

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<sup>68</sup> Albert Camus, “Révolte et servitude” in *Actuelles II*, 235-256. This claim is found on pp. 241-2.



of his political cynicism, he questions the morality of the Revolutionary committee – if its morality is not absolute nor is their judgment. In response, Sade dreams of ‘absolute crime.’ Thus, against Rousseau’s supposition of man’s innate goodness in the state of nature and the reasonability of men, and the French Republic that grounds itself upon this philosophy, Sade offsets the ‘universal republic of human wickedness’ (43). And in opposition to God he chooses ‘nature,’ rendering his rebellion ‘one of instinct not principle’ (38). The unlimited freedom of desire which guides Sade’s rebellion (42) implies the subjection of others, however, and thus the only law is that of power (45). The totalitarian kingdom he dreams of is one of masters and slaves in which the masters turn on each other when finally the slaves are depleted. In short, notes Camus, the absolute negation with which Sade opens his rebellion leads to absolute assent – destroy or be destroyed (45). In light of this first oscillation between absolute negation and assent, he claims that ‘the history and the tragedy of our time begin with Sade.’

Sade’s dream survives under different guises. For example, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Stirner alludes to the last survivor of Sade’s kingdom in his notion of the ‘Unique One’ in the name of absolute individualism. Politically, Sade’s empire based on biology, blood and instinct manifests itself in Nazism, the domination of the many by the select few. Nazism, the ‘religion of the Fuhrer,’ is a ‘debased religion’ of blood and dominance. And “when all the world has become military, then crime consists in not killing if orders insist on it” (183). The desire for absolute liberty thus leads to absolute tyranny and terrorism, individually and collectively. Ultimately, so too does the desire for absolute justice.

The Romantics who immediately follow Sade, such as Rimbaud and Lautremont, continue to rebel in the name of the individual. They challenge God's justice and defy man's morality, at least in their literary output if not in their private lives. To their logic, as God 'claims all the goodness of man,' they 'refuse goodness and choose evil' (47). The presupposition of their understanding of 'the good' is Augustine's account of evil, that is, of the doctrine of original sin. According to Augustine, humans are capable of doing only evil. Whatever good we do is done solely through the grace of God. Thus Camus refers to the Romantic's revolt as a 'Luciferian styled insurrection.' However, insofar as they claim to be equals of God, they require the one against whom they revolt. Thus, their rebellion is blasphemous not atheistic. While the sacred order is questioned, then, it is not overturned. And inasmuch as the Romantics need to be seen to sustain their revolt, the 'dandies' revolution is one of appearances.

It is with the birth of Dostoevsky's character, Ivan Karamazov, that God is 'put on trial.' Camus holds that central to Karamazov's rebellion is his claim that 'even if God exists' he prefers justice to a God who allows innocent children to suffer. Thus Karamazov revolts out of a love for humanity, sacrificing personal salvation in light of the suffering of others and the need to accept evil that God's salvation appears to entail. He therefore chooses the reign of justice over that of grace. Without the premise of immortality, however, there is no reward and punishment and consequently there is no virtue either. With Karamazov's recognition that now 'everything is permitted,' 'the history of contemporary nihilism begins' (57).

Nihilism is first ‘made conscious’ in the works of Nietzsche, however. Camus asserts that “he attacks... the illusion of God that lingers, under the guise of morality, in the thought of his times” (34). Nietzsche’s formal announcement of the ‘death of God’ coincides with his movement of absolute assent to all there as enshrined by his concept of *amor fati*. Regardless of whether one considers the notion of eternal recurrence as a metaphysical doctrine or, as Sherman neatly states it, a type of ‘psychological litmus test,’ Nietzsche’s assent to the world as it is amounts to an assent to the world of master and slaves, giving “blessing to the stronger of the two” (77). Though Marx’s absolute consent to history inverts that of Nietzsche to the cosmos, there are echoes of Nietzsche’s assent to all there is in the Communist Revolution’s deification of history.

Rebellion thus moves from dream to appearance and finally to action as, with the death of God and the correlative promise of immortality, establishing justice becomes the task of man. However, the ‘rebellious logic’ which results in this change of reign remains rooted within the terms of the absolute. The absolute submission to God and to suffering required by the Christian revolution was, according to Camus, a refusal of the “suffering imposed by a limited situation” (7). This original refusal to accept the reality of the human condition is opposed by absolute negation at the opening of Modernity and once again the limited condition of the creature is immediately overstepped. Modernity’s metaphysical rebellion, then, is the revolt of the slave who in turn desires to be master (25). While the master changes, the parameters of the first attempt at a definitive revolution do not. In light of this, Camus concludes that after the ‘razing of the city of

God, a rational or irrational state founded on terror emerges' (177) and both the resultant competing ideologies, the bourgeois and communist, end in absolute servitude.

Camus refers to Modernity's rebellious logic as the 'disembodied thought of Europe.' As noted earlier, Christianity's divorce of truth and reason from beauty instated a gap between sensibility and intelligibility. Descartes's 'discovery' of the principle of subjectivity in early Modernity echoes and decidedly exacerbates this gap. Camus concludes that "we... have thrown both universe and mind out of orbit" (LCE 149). In light of this, it is arguably the abstract man who revolts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, not the whole man. Sade rebels on the basis of instinct and passion, and inaugurates absolute irrationalism in the name of absolute freedom; and St. Just's revolt, based on 'reason,' ushers in absolute rationalism in the name of absolute justice. The revolution in which St. Just had a hand is, I suggest, carried out in the name of an abstraction, as well. The love of eternity is replaced by a professed love for 'humanity.' This is the love of an idea as opposed to the love of man for man. The divided self of the West, or the abstract man, thus makes his appearance at the outset of metaphysical rebellion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, asserts Camus, "man cast off the fetters of religion. Hardly was he free, however, when he created new and utterly intolerable chains" (280), with the delivery of man to "a kind of love for the future" (280). I will now briefly consider the two revolutions inspired by the West's metaphysical rebellion.

*On Modernity's historical revolution*

The metaphysical rebellion which precedes the Jacobin revolution replaces God with transcendent principles and faith with Reason. The 'philosopher's dream' which

inspired this revolution is that of Rousseau's myth of the 'social contract' whose 'ideas were introduced into the pages of history' by St. Just (117). With the revolution, the principle of political unity formally enshrined by the divine right of kings is thereby transferred to the 'will of the people' by virtue of the 'social contract.' This contract, predicated upon the 'goodness of human nature' and the reasonability of man, ushers in the rule of absolute rationalism. As the contract presupposes 'the will of nature and of reason,' the will of each is enshrined in the transcendent notion of the 'general will' in which all recognize their interests and from which 'they derive their rights and duties.' As such, claims Camus, "if the general will is freely expressed, it can only be the universal expression of reason" (121). With the murder of King Louis XVI, the representative of God on earth is killed and with the ascendancy of the 'general will' the reign of God gives way to the reign of Reason. With the notion of this transcendent 'general will,' 'the people' are thereby divinized. As it is the will of all, it is the assurance of justice and in principle there ought not to be any dissension. If there is, the individual or group is deviant, not the 'general will.' In what Camus refers to as 'the philosophy of eternity,' the 'idyll exists.' Those who oppose this kingdom of Reason, then, are misguided and guilty of attempting to destroy the idyll. After the murder of the King, executions become the order of the day and the guillotine, which had been rejected as a symbol of the old rule, is resurrected by St. Just, a legislator of the 'general will.' State terrorism is thus ushered in in the name of absolute Reason and the 'rational will,' which to be instated requires the destruction of all difference. Freedom is made dependent on absolute consent. The desire for absolute justice, undergirded by the presupposition of

absolute rationalism, ushers in terror and absolute servitude. It also ushers in moral formalism which consists in ‘disincarnate values.’ Just as a legislator is to interpret the ‘general will’ in matters of political dissension, so the question of how such values are translated into history arises – or by whom, as Marx asks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Hegel is the first to grapple with moral formalism. In order to render value concrete, he introduces (absolute) reason into the flux of history (226) with the rallying cry that ‘the rational is real and the real rational.’ The dialectical reign of Mind or Spirit, a “supra-historical value” (199), is instantiated in history itself. Its self-realization in history is that which will overcome the contradictions of the particular and universal or the real and the ideal. In concrete terms, this dialectic will inaugurate a universal reconciliation of difference, rendering human history itself completely rational and therefore entirely just. The ‘remains of god in the principles enshrined by the Enlightenment are thereby introduced into history.’ Marx’s historical materialism evacuates what remains of these principles in Hegel’s idealism. The only transcendence left is that of the future. The (sacred) history of the West is thereby reduced to the mundane in Modernity, delivering it to pure immanence. The notion of transcendence which remains is horizontal and ‘the only god left is the future.’ The fixity of the spiritual in Christianity and of principles in the ‘philosophy of eternity’ gives way to pure chance. With nothing outside of the flux of history, value is reduced to that which succeeds and man is thereby delivered to the law of power (181). Camus claims that Marx’s reduction of value to history ‘completes the movement of negation begun by the Enlightenment’ (200), thereby ‘consecrating historical nihilism’ (246).

Camus considers the three elements of Marx's theory – its critical method; the predictive function purportedly based on science; and the prophetic element that Camus refers to as "Utopian Messianism" (188), which 'replaces god by the future.' In his critique of moral formalism, Marx discloses that the human rights enshrined by the French Revolution extended only as far as the bourgeois, the class which ruled economically before the revolution and in whose interests, ultimately, it was carried out. The rights did not extend to the children, women and men of the working class who sustained the economy or to the non-European colonies, just as presently these rights do not extend to 'Third World' workers. With Marx, Camus asserts that bourgeois rule is 'rule by hypocrisy.' In light of this, Marx returns to Hegel's master/slave relationship in his interpretation of the relations of economic classes (205).

The predictive element of Marx's theory was falsified by the Communist Revolution itself as the revolution did not occur in the most industrialized state but in agricultural Russia. And the imminence of the end, expected by the revolutionaries just as it had been expected by the early evangelical Christian community writes Camus, was also given lie by history. With the failure of the predictive function, there remains only the prophetic which in effect consists in the incorporation of the bourgeois faith in science and progress. Camus states that 'this element is a function of faith, and like all religions impossible to gainsay, which is the strength of all religions' (189). Indeed, 'politics in Modernity is religion without transcendence' claims Camus. It has become the salvation of humanity by humanity in accordance with a teleological politics of either progress or history.

Camus asserts that in dialectical materialism ‘man is reduced to the history of the means of production.’ As ‘economic determinism is the root of man, the individual is reduced to social being and the sacrifice of the individual to the salvation of humanity is rendered negligible’ (204). History is to be ‘redeemed by the working class,’ who is the modern ‘suffering servant’ (205). With the prolongation of the struggle, ‘the party’ becomes the new priesthood, that is, those who are able to read history. Without a pre-existent value to justify action, however, efficacy, the measure of which is success, is the only guide. In effect, all action becomes a function of pure power which heralds the inauguration of authoritarian or caesarean socialism (199). What is right is what works and the prophesied end is the justification of all means. Again, by the end of Modernity man is delivered to history and power. With the deification of history in caesarean revolution, all are reduced to objects – both the workers and party members. While reward remains a function of the future as in Christian messianism, punishment is meted out until the end of history as the retardation of the end is understood as a result of men, not the ‘good will’ of History. Until the inauguration of the idyll, all are presumed guilty. As in the French Revolution, state terrorism and absolute servitude are the results of this revolution.

#### *The Bourgeois and Communist myths*

When *L’Homme révolté* was published in 1951, Camus was pilloried by the intellectual Left in France and, strangely, applauded by the Right. While his condemnation of capitalism was less obvious than that of communism in his essay, he clearly states that he sees no real difference between these competing ideologies. In fact,



according to Camus they are both forms of historic messianism, the origins of which are Christian. He claims that the only difference between Christian and Communist messianic thought ‘lies in a change in symbols.’ I suggest that this equally applies to capitalism as both capitalism, undergirded by the concept of progress, and communism, guided by the inevitable dialectic of history, promise a terrestrial kingdom in the future as opposed to a heavenly one. Thus, just as Camus asserts that “eternity separates [Christianity and communism] at the beginning, ... [but] the doctrines of history end by reuniting them in a realistic conclusion” (193), so too with capitalism. In effect, both ideologies are attempts to create absolute Utopias as Camus claims in “Ni victimes, ni bourreaux.”

Rather than a change in sensibility, then, which is the plane on which the birth of a civilization occurs, the modern rebellions are merely a continuation of a metaphysics predicated on history as instated by the Christian revolution. However, Camus claims that in Modernity “the historical spirit of totality, ... invented by Christianity... [is now] cut off from its religious origins [and] threatens the life of Europe today” (193). The passion for unity, which is the impulse of all rebellion, consists in ‘the harmony of contraries.’ However, on the plane of history this passion tends to become ‘a conquest of totality’ which entails ‘the erasure of difference.’<sup>69</sup> The promise of unity in Modern historical messianism, be it based on a faith in progress or in the dialectic of history, requires that all be included within its compass in order that unity be achieved. And world domination, writes Camus, is precisely the ‘drive for the universal city’ (186).

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<sup>69</sup> On the distinction between unity and totality, see Albert Camus, “Le témoin de la liberté” (“The Witness of Liberty”), in *Actuelles I*, 184-192. This distinction is found on pp. 189-190.

He asserts that both capitalism and communism are based on the ‘myth of unlimited production’ which leads to wars and results in “the same enslavement” (218). In capitalism, the dignity of the worker is sacrificed to production while the ‘master promises the slave a share in property in the future.’ Progress toward equality in the bourgeois myth thus renders the formal principle of the equality of all men, until that point, empty. In communism, the concept of progress is translated as ‘the reconciliation of social relations through transformation in production’ (194). Until then, the individual is sacrificed to the prophesied ‘future man.’ In the capitalist dream liberty will lead to an equitable distribution of goods and thus to justice. In caesarean socialism ‘summary justice’ will inaugurate absolute freedom at the end of history. Camus writes that “we dream of an equilibrium we have lost, and which in our simplicity we think we shall rediscover once again when our errors cease – an infantile presumption...” (LCE 149).

Camus died in 1960 at the height of the Cold War when populations lived with a heightened awareness of the real possibility of a nuclear war. He would not have been surprised by the fall of either of the blocs in light of his understanding of the ‘conquest of totality’ as the ‘drive for the universal city.’ With the demise of communism, what remains at present is capitalism and within capitalism, the corollary of unlimited production is unlimited consumption. With the reduction of man to history, which presupposes the infinite malleability of man, Western man has been transformed into the consumer, a product of unlimited production which exists in the service of the economy. Communism may be dead but the postulate of economic determinism appears not to have died with it. At the culmination of the turn from the mythic conception of the world, that

is, of sea, sun, rock and flesh, the West has become a shopper's world and the human being a product of it. Indeed, our relationship with nature is now understood largely in terms of the environmental crisis which is packaged in green products and sold to us as the solution. Just as during the Christian era, the contemporary understanding of nature largely remains that which is to be transformed.

### *On logical crime*

Camus opens *L'Homme révolté* stating that “the purpose of this essay is once again to face the reality of the present, which is logical crime, and to examine meticulously the arguments by which it is justified; it is an attempt to understand the times in which we live” (3). By ‘logical crime’ Camus intends both the direct and indirect murder committed and legitimated by the State in opposition to ‘crimes of passion.’ The experience of the absurd which preceded the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which Camus refers to as the ‘age of negation,’ is followed by the ‘age of ideologies’ in which we are arguably still living. The ideals of ‘democracy and freedom,’ which have become linked with an economic system, are the rallying cry of the West at present and are imposed largely when and where it chooses, regardless of the realities of the ‘recipient populations.’ The guiding question of *L'Homme révolté* – whether murder is ever legitimate – is still germane, then. The ‘values of eternity’ and the ‘degraded values of history’ have both legitimated direct and indirect murder – capitalism is built and run on the backs of the poor who will share in the profits when there is ‘enough’ and communism sacrificed the individual to the future man. For Camus, what is at stake is the

rebirth of Western civilization or the continuance of nihilism, the essential indicator of which is an indifference to life.

Having ‘raised the ramparts of the mind’ against sensibility, moderns have become prisoners of consciousness. Indeed, the way we speak reveals the disembodiment of our thought. We speak of betraying an ideal. Yet as Camus writes in his notes for *Le premier homme*, “betrayal concerns the flesh, the single individual.”<sup>70</sup> Betrayal is always the betrayal of someone – of this person or this group of people. In the present geo-political world order, murder is justified in the name of God or Democracy, that is, we kill a human being in the name of that which transcends the one who stands before us, thereby diverting our attention from the concrete reality of what we do. Given that the disincarnate values of eternity ‘ratify historical injustice and suffering’ and history alone gives rise solely to the law of power, Camus asks, what is the source of value which allows us to judge history? (250) If a new value cannot be found, the indifference to life will only increase and logical crime will continue with impunity.

Thus, Camus also returns to *Le Mythe* in the introduction of *L’Homme révolté*. He asserts that “absolute nihilism, which accepts suicide as legitimate, leads, even more easily, to logical murder. If our age admits, with equanimity, that murder has its justifications, it is because of this indifference to life which is the mark of nihilism” (6). He links the refusal of suicide and the movement of rebellion as both are a struggle against the irrationality of ‘an unjust and incomprehensible condition.’ In fact, rebellion is one possible response to the experience of the absurd. It is an expression of a desire for

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<sup>70</sup> Albert Camus, *The First Man*, trans. David Hapgood (Canada: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 314. [*Le premier homme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.]

order in a disordered universe and opens up the possibility of transformation. An alternative is the absolutization of the sensibility of the absurd which arises from one perception of reality amongst others “and then the initial anguish runs the risk of turning to comfort” (8-9).

In the West, the age of ethical relativism which follows the age of Enlightenment and absolute values is a manifestation of this comfort – or complacency. This ethics is itself understood as an altogether new type of enlightenment as the ‘virtue of tolerance’ is said to be its ground. At root, however, ethical relativism is nihilistic. Relativism implies that there are no shared values, no measure by which we can determine the ethical weight of an action. Instead, each in their solitude is granted the right to feel or believe what they will and do as they will, the only proviso generally being that it not impinge on my freedom to do as I like. Camus identifies this complacency in absurdism with Nietzsche’s notion of “‘hog-faced’ pleasure seekers” (9). At present, the materialism of the West, in which the measure of one’s value is dependent largely upon what one owns and where shame is attached to poverty, appears to reflect precisely this complacency. Ultimately, all actions are equal and thus equally indifferent. It is indifference or complacency in the guise of tolerance, then. Such indifferentism remains a mark of the absurd, however.

#### *On the value of rebellion*

In the introduction to *L’Homme révolté*, Camus also returns to the argument against suicide. However, in contrast to focusing upon defiance, as is the case in *Le Mythe*, in this text he more clearly concentrates upon that which is preserved through the absurd man’s defiance – life itself. He first recapitulates the impasse reached by an

absurd reasoning, the presupposition of which is nihilism. If nothing has any value, suicide and murder are a matter of indifference. As there is no virtue, there is no vice and everything is permitted. He argues that we could decide not to act at all, but this form of quietism is an indirect acquiescence in murder. Or we could decide on a course of action but in the absence of any value to guide our action, ‘our aim will be immediate efficacy.’ Efficacy is ultimately ruled by the strongest and so this route is the way to the world of ‘master and slave’ rather than that of the ‘just and unjust.’

An absurd reasoning thus demonstrates that murder is a possibility against which it cannot raise reasonable objections. However, this logic equally denies the possibility of murder. To commit suicide, be it physical or intellectual, in the face of the absurd is to repudiate what this encounter between our need to understand and the silence of the universe gives rise. It is ‘flight or deliverance’ and a refusal of the absurd wager which is to live in defiance of an unjust and incomprehensible universe. Life itself, though, is “the only necessary good since it is precisely life that makes this encounter possible and since, without life, the absurdist wager would have no basis” (6). As such, Camus concludes that “from the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men” (6). Suicide and murder, then, are at root “the same thing and must be accepted or rejected together” (6).

An absurd logic therefore ends in contradiction as suicide and murder are conceived as both possible and impossible acts. As living in such a contradiction is not possible, Camus argues that the absurd is an experience to be lived through. Again, as it is one perception of reality amongst others, to consider the experience of the absurd as an

end is to render what is relative absolute. It is also a denial of the reality of all emotions – in this case, that of despair. Like all emotions, “despair is a feeling, and not a permanent condition... and feelings must give way to a clear view of things” (NB/35: 83). Indeed, it is in part this very flux of perceptions and emotions which gives rise to the nostalgia for unity and order, that is, for a sense of ‘completion.’ But, as Camus notes, ‘nature and history are never at rest.’ Once again, this experience is a beginning, not an end.

Modernity’s rebellion and the Christian revolution it challenged are nihilistic in that they are both absolutist, which is a denial of the real inasmuch as it is relative (80). While absolutes can be thought, they cannot be lived. Nihilism, then, is the ‘substitution of ideal for real ends’ (69). Thus, the nihilist ‘is not the one who believes in nothing but the one who does not believe in what exists.’ In this respect, Christianity and Modernity’s Gnostic reformulation of this metaphysics are nihilistic insofar as they are the absolute negations of the real, that is, of nature and life. These ‘substitute universes,’ each marked by a messianic and totalizing logic, are the presuppositions of the experience of the absurd. With the collapse of the explanatory structures the absurd arises. In the absurdist’s refusal to go beyond what his experience evidences, he upholds life in his refusal to make value judgments. However, inasmuch as ‘choosing to live is a value judgment,’ the absurd logic contradicts itself once again. As noted in chapter two, life considered in itself is indeterminate or abstract (Sherman 80). Life considered as a value, then, is an abstract one from which a rule of behaviour cannot be derived. But it does require that a choice be made. At best, the absurdist can proclaim the value of life. The rebel, though, “does not ask for life, but for reasons for living” (101). And in the

movement of rebellion, which seeks order out of chaos, the rebel finds his reason – the defence of the common dignity of the living community of men rather than that of a promised future, be it ‘the mirage of the eternal city’ or the ‘empty promised land’ (305).

In *L’Homme révolté*, the section on metaphysical rebellion begins immediately following the claim that “I rebel – therefore we exist” (22). The chapter ends with the statement, “And we are alone” (104). Camus asserts that Modernity’s long rebellion is “the history of European pride” (11). It opens in outraged innocence against a god perceived as absolutely unjust and reaches an end wherein all are considered guilty until the idyll arrives. He asserts of Modern man that “once he had escaped from god’s prison, his first care was to construct the prison of history and of reason, thus putting the finishing touch to the camouflage and consecration of the nihilism whose conquest he claimed” (80). In effect, Modernity perversely recapitulates the Christian story of the absolute innocence of the first man and the absolute guilt of humanity. And as Modernity’s rebellion remains within the parameters of the absolute, the logic leads from one excess to another inasmuch as the limits of the real are exceeded. In light of this, Camus refers to Modern revolutionaries as ‘the sons of Cain’ rather than as the ‘sons of Prometheus’ (32). In a notebook entry of late 1942 or early 1943, Camus writes that “Cain’s crime... has exhausted our strength and our love for life” (NB/42: 28). The crime of Cain, like that of the Modern revolutionary, is brother killing brother. Yet his crime has worsened as “today Cain kills Abel in the name of logic and afterwards claims the Legion of Honour” (A/I 185-6).



Recall that in the 1945 essay “*Remarque sur la révolte*,” Camus writes that in rebellion is discovered our first value, that of our solidarity, and the first truth, that ‘we are not alone.’ In the first movement of rebellion, which is a movement of love, the oppressed and the oppressor are held in a tension. What is upheld is not one’s ‘rights’ but the dignity of man which includes that of the oppressor. A visceral sense of identity with the other is the ground of this experience of unity and an awareness of the right ordering of relations. The demand that the limit overstepped by the other be respected is therefore claimed not for oneself alone, but in the name of the dignity of all men. These first values – a sense of unity and an inchoate awareness of justice and liberty – to which the affront gives rise, allow us to recognize the common nature of man. They are in fact ‘living virtues.’ Camus thereby claims that genuine rebellion is “the discovery of a human value that stands halfway between innocence and guilt, between reason and irrationality, between history and eternity” (171).

These values arise at the juncture of nature and history, the individual and society. It is in trying to realize this unity in history, that is, in attempting to transfigure historical relations that the possibility of murder arises. A loss of the tension of rebellion leads to tyranny or servitude as in the rebellions of Modernity (100), and then murder, direct and indirect, is legitimated in the name of progress or the future. The experience of unity revealed in the movement of rebellion is thereby betrayed and ‘man is thrown back into the solitude from which he was just delivered.’

Rather than a claim to absolute innocence, real rebellion recognizes what Camus refers to as ‘reasonable culpability.’ He argues that calculated murder, such as war, is

never justifiable. In light of this, he was derisively called a pacifist in spite of having said he would take up arms again if the need arose, as he had during World War II. He also notes that because he is against the death penalty, “[t]hey say I am against all violence, of whatever kind. This would be as intelligent as objecting to the wind always blowing from the same direction” (NB/42: 114). At times injustice must be met with arms, as during the war against the Nazis. This war, however, was not ‘fated.’ Misdirected policy decisions which concluded World War I have been assessed as causal in relation to World War II. The point is not that murder is never necessary. The point is, rather, that it can never be justified in terms of the innocent and the guilty, but only in terms of reasonable culpability. There is no ‘just war’ strictly speaking. This is at heart, I suggest, an expression of a tragic view of existence. At times what one needs to do is ultimately unjustifiable. This position is equally resonant with Camus’s assertion about the importance of naming things properly. As noted earlier, he states that we should not say of the man condemned to death that he is ‘paying his debt to society,’ but rather that we are murdering a man. We may well understand it as ‘debt repayment,’ but the action itself needs to be identified clearly. This clarity of expression prevents the occlusion of concrete actions through language. If sensibilities are offended, so much the better. Such lucidity may well lead to thinking things through more carefully.

Camus cites one example of genuine rebels, a group of Russian students who decided in 1905 to resort to terrorist activity. On taking a life they did not withhold their own. In fact, they refused pardon. Critics have argued that Camus’s position amounts to a view that one death is cancelled out with the other, which is problematic from the side of

the one assassinated as they are not privy to the choice the rebel has made for himself. While Camus does appear to suggest this equivalency at one point in *L'Homme révolté*, this critique does not do justice to his thought. Rather, the heart of Camus's position is that "violence... must ... preserve, for the rebel, its provisional character of effraction [*sic*] and must always be bound, if it cannot be avoided, to a personal responsibility and to an immediate risk" (292).

In a notebook entry of mid-June 1947, Camus considers this issue. There he writes that

[t]he great purity of the terrorist (of the Kaliayev type [who was one of the 1905 rebels]) lies in the fact that for him murder coincides with suicide.... A life is paid for by a life. The reasoning is fallacious but worthy of respect? (A life that is taken away is not the equivalent of a life that is given.) Today, murder by proxy. No one pays. (NB/43: 102)

Violence in history is unavoidable in Camus's view. He asserts that "absolute non-violence is the negative basis of slavery and its acts of violence; [whereas] systematic violence positively destroys the living community and the existence we receive from it" (291). Sometime after mid-June 1947, Camus writes the following in a notebook entry:

Insist on violence as *destruction*, as a crime – that is to say accept it only when linked to a *personal* responsibility. Otherwise it is *by order*, it is *in order* – either law or metaphysics. It has ceased to be destructive. It skips round contradiction. It comes, paradoxically, to represent a leap into comfort. *Violence has been made comfortable.* (NB/42: 110-111)

This reflects Camus's view that taking a life can never be justified. It may be necessary, as assassination attempts on Hitler surely were, but it does not make it 'right.' Taking a life is the destruction of the community of men which the rebel is trying to uphold through his action. In killing, he places himself outside of that community. In facing the

consequences of his actions he upholds it. The rebel is faced with two equal claims – one is the claim for justice for the oppressed, the other concerns the injustice of murder. This is a contradiction which cannot be overstepped, only met. It is the faceless, bureaucratic crime to which Camus objects – the logical crime of governments which is justified by a belief in progress or the future, that is, “in preferring an abstract concept of man to a man of flesh and blood” (304).

In a notebook entry of October 17, 1937, Camus writes that “the body, a true path to culture, teaches us where our limits lie” (NB/35: 39). Liberty and justice are not disincarnate values. In the first instance they are limits inscribed in and by the body, that is, by the integrity of the whole person. Camus thereby asserts that “our brothers are breathing under the same sky as we; justice is a living thing” (306). The recognition and acceptance of the limits of existence, in contrast to the ideals of disembodied thought, are the preconditions both for dialogue and for the possibility of responding to the immediate needs of man as opposed to moulding reality in light of an ideology. In opposition to ideology, Camus claims that dialogue is creation and that “every act of creation by its mere existence, denies the world of masters and slave” (R 274). Genuine rebellion constantly corrects itself in returning to its original impetus. It is an attempt to create ‘a living home in time’ as opposed to forcing the present into an imagined future. Camus asserts that in Modernity, however, “[i]mpatience with limits, the rejection of their double life, despair at being a man, have finally driven [Western men] to inhuman excesses” (305). Thus, the human value that is found in all genuine rebellion and which

“stands halfway between innocence and guilt, between reason and irrationality, between history and eternity” (171), was overstepped. In light of this, Camus claims that

[t]he men of Europe, abandoned to the shadows, have turned their backs upon the fixed and radiant point of the present.... They no longer believe in the things that exist in the world and in living man; the secret of Europe is that it no longer loves life. (305)

At stake for Camus is the possibility of a renaissance of Western civilization, a precondition of which is rebellion. Again, Augustine wed a Christian sensibility and a Greek taste for the rational, thereby giving birth to the Christian civilization. Christ's rebellion was its precondition, though. What might give rise to a new sensibility, then, which itself is a precondition for the birth of a civilization? Camus, with his pagan sensibility and Christian concerns, enters a dialogue with Augustine. Like the Christian tradition, Camus's interest lies in social justice and freedom in this world, without the promise of another, however. I believe Camus's argument is that a new sensibility requires the recognition of our radical finitude, that is, of the body. Otherwise said, it requires “the conversion to the relative which signifies fidelity to the human condition” (RR 19).

Precisely how to speak of ‘the body’ is a problem. If one speaks of our ‘embodiment,’ this implies that there is something which potentially transcends the body but is now ‘in’ the body. There is no thought that is not bodied thought, though the soul/body or mind/body dualism of the West occludes this reality, as does our sense of ourselves at times. This dualism is in fact enshrined in language. Bodied thought, however, is thought which recognizes its limits in opposition to the dialectic logic which

has ruled Western thought. The concrete other is my limit and the source of living virtues such as justice and liberty, which we each inchoately feel when our integrity is breached.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry's argument that culture, material and spiritual, is a function of the self-objectification of the needs of the body (57) may be a useful approach to filling out Camus's assertion that the body is the true path to culture. For example, our homes and cuisine are extensions of the body's needs. For Camus, like Scarry, the body is not merely 'physical' but 'sentient tissue.' The body is always the thinking, feeling, sensing body. The dualism of mind/body is, then, a by-product of this ordinary unity of mind/body/spirit.

According to Scarry, the "human body is the original site of reality" (121). And the self-objectification of the needs of the body in both material and immaterial cultural forms are a type of self-transcendence, a moving beyond the body. Thus, the body is 'in part naturally given and in part made' (121). In opposition to this understanding of self-transcendence is, I suggest, the movement of interiority, yet another way of 'moving beyond' the body or more precisely, an abstraction from it which gives rise to the notion of the 'mind/body' dualism and the experience of the body as merely 'physical' or 'material.' The creativity of the body, that is, of the whole person, is then attributed to 'thought' considered in itself. And only in reason or thought abstracted from the limits of the real is thinking of or in absolutes possible. Equally then, only at the level of logic is thinking in terms of all or nothing a possibility, such as the thought that one is either absolutely innocent or absolutely guilty.

Sometime between April and September of 1950, Camus writes in his notebook, “[w]hen we have the good fortune to live in the world of the mind, by what madness can we wish to enter the cries and terrible house of passion” (NB/42: 168). His work, in *L’Homme révolté* and the rest of the corpus it alludes to, is arguably a sustained attempt to return to that which has never really disappeared – animated being, for whose literal survival Camus was concerned. It reflects his profession that ‘the time for abstraction is over.’ As quoted in the prologue to this paper, in his 1946 essay “Prometheus in the Underworld,” Camus writes,

I sometimes doubt whether men can be saved today. But it is still possible to save their children, both body and mind.... [T]he myth of Prometheus is one of those that will remind us that any mutilation of man can only be temporary, and that one serves nothing in man if one does not serve the whole man. (LCE 141-2)

Recall here the words of Voegelin also quoted in the introduction to this paper. He asserts that “from the very first the work was deliberately designed with a view to a meditation in the medium of the myth. In the degree in which his quest through knowledge is illumined, the mood of existence changes.” (190) In closing this paper, then, one more myth and the mood or tone it instates will be considered, that of the genesis story of Modern man which Camus relates in the last novel he completed before his death – *La Chute*.

Whatever we may do, excess will always keep its place in the heart of man, in the place where solitude is found. We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to fight them in ourselves and in others. Rebellion, the secular will not to surrender... is still today at the basis of the struggle. Origin of form, source of real life, it keeps us always erect in the savage, formless movement of history.

*L'Homme révolté*  
Camus

### **Section 3: *Book of Genesis***



## Chapter 5

### *On the historical context of a revolted man: An introduction*

*La Chute*, appearing in 1956, was the final novel Camus published before his death in 1960 and as such it will be the last text I consider at any length in this paper. The book is a monologue in the guise of a dialogue between the protagonist, Jean Baptiste Clamence (an assumed name), and an unidentified interlocutor. It consists in Clamence's pseudo-confession to this stranger, as well as his reasons for it. The meeting takes place over the course of five days in and around the *Mexico City Bar* in Amsterdam, sometime in the early-to-mid-1950s. The book sold well but met with mixed reviews. According to Todd, while Sartre thought it was a masterpiece and Camus's best work to date, "Sartre's crowd could not embrace it, nor could the journalists who reviewed the book" (Todd 343).

Aside from *L'Étranger*, however, it has since become one of his most frequently commented upon novels. This abiding interest lies in the ambiguity of the content, the tone of the work and its open ending. Given the construction of the novel, the reader is called upon to complete it. And the tone, which is dark and sardonic, is considered uncharacteristic of Camus and is thus interpreted as being largely reflective of his state of mind at the time of writing. Indeed, the novel is rife with quasi-autobiographical references from both his private and public life. In light of this, Thody asserts that one possible reading, amongst others, is that *La Chute* is a confessional work as Camus may well have been "genuinely haunted by an awareness of his own inadequacies, and wished to exorcise his feelings of guilt by casting them into a work of art" (93). According to

Roger Quilliot, an intimate of Camus's, *La Chute* is "an indirect confession and a cry from the author's heart,"<sup>71</sup> though he also notes that trying "to identify Camus with Clamence would be as gross an error as to insist on mixing him up with Tarrou [of *La Peste*]" (O'Brien 80). Finally, in his essay "The Rhetoric of Dizziness: *La Chute*," David Ellison notes that "[i]t is by now well established in the critical literature that *La Chute* is on one level an autobiographical/confessional text, Camus's poignant discovery of his own human fallibility."<sup>72</sup> This is something of an overstatement as there are those who do not consider this aspect at all, such as Cruickshank. However, there does appear to be all but a consensus on this point, even if many of the commentators I have read are somewhat more circumspect than Ellison allows here.

Following the publication of *L'Homme révolté* in 1951, Camus in fact did feel increasingly isolated on several fronts. As noted in the last chapter, he was pilloried by the intellectual Left in France, nowhere more publicly than in *Les temps modernes*, a periodical of which Sartre was the managing editor. In May 1952, the journal published a highly unfavourable critique by Francis Jeanson, "a specialist in Sartre's philosophy" (Todd 307). Jeanson "described Camus as a pseudophilosopher who had written a pseudohistory of revolutions" (Todd 307). He was dismayed by Camus's critiques of both the French and Communist Revolutions and rebuked him for being applauded by a number of critics of the Right (Todd 306-7). Rather than responding directly to Jeanson, in June Camus wrote a lengthy letter addressed to the 'Director of *Les temps modernes*,'

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<sup>71</sup> Brian T. Fitch, *The Fall: A Matter of Guilt*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 14-5. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Fitch.

<sup>72</sup> David Ellison, "The Rhetoric of Dizziness: *La Chute*," in Bloom's *Modern Critical Views: Albert Camus*, 115-138. This quote is found on p. 122.

which was published in August.<sup>73</sup> This led to a correspondence between Sartre and Camus that became increasingly personal and vitriolic. In his response, Camus referred to Sartre as a bourgeois. Sartre replied that “[y]ou may indeed have once been poor, but you are poor no longer. You are a bourgeois, like Jeanson and myself” (Todd 308). As such, he asserted that Camus had no more right to speak for the poor than had others. By September, Sartre and Camus had formally and publicly ended their friendship and collaboration, a fact noted in the French newspapers, as was the controversy which preceded the break.

During this same period, the tension in colonial Algeria was quickly rising and an increasingly radical indigenous revolt was met with equally radical repressive measures on the part of the French Government. In November 1954, the Algerian War began. Camus had written about the oppression of the Arab population of Algeria since 1939 and had continuously called for both a dialogue between the parties and for a policy of amelioration before it was too late. He was sympathetic to the demand for political independence of the 9 million Arabs who were treated as second-class citizens in their own land. However, amongst other reasons, as an Algerian by birth, he preferred a federal solution as opposed to decolonization. He believed that an association of the two nations in Algeria was the most equitable solution. As a consequence of this middle position, he was isolated by the Metropolitan and Algerian French Right, who regarded him as a traitor. The Metropolitan French Left, including Sartre, was arguing for a policy of decolonization. The fact that Camus criticized the Communist prison camps but

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<sup>73</sup> For the full text of this letter, see “Révolte et servitude” in *Actuelles II*, 235-256.

upheld the French in Algeria was interpreted as bad faith on his part. Finally, the radical Arabs considered him a colonialist, as did the French Left. In early February of 1956, Camus made one of his last public efforts on this front. In spite of death threats, he gave a lecture in Algiers entitled “Appeal for a Civilian Truce in Algeria.”<sup>74</sup> He also wrote a final editorial in *L’Express* about this trip to Algeria, stating that

I am well aware that this type of action inspires more ridicule than support, and people like to see it as an admission of ignorance or powerlessness. If they feel that way, let them, but I firmly believe in the possibility of an unconstrained association between the French and Arabs in Algeria. (Todd 337)

In April of that same year, he adopted a policy of silence regarding the Algerian question, claiming that it was “in order not to add to its unhappiness or to the foolishness which is being written on the subject” (Todd 339). Camus did, however, continue to work outside of the public eye, for example by signing petitions for release, clemency or pardon for the French and Arabs whom he believed had been unjustly imprisoned by the French government. Finally, in 1958, he published his *Chroniques algériennes* which consisted of his writings on this issue from 1939 to 1958, the preface of which contained a defence of his federalist stance.

Given the post-colonial perspective with which O’Brien reads Camus’s works, he asserts that the ‘Algerian conflict weighed on his conscience’ as Camus had asserted the right of, for instance, the Hungarians to rebel against Soviet occupation in 1956, but refused it to the Arabs. According to O’Brien, in this more directly personal case, Camus was ‘political and partisan’ and ‘increasingly right wing,’ thereby appearing to contradict himself in what was for him a ‘concrete’ as opposed to a more ‘abstract’ instance of

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<sup>74</sup> For the full text of this lecture, see *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, 131-142.

justice (75). As the prior causes he espoused did not affect him directly, they are, in retrospect, interpreted as being ‘easy.’ This assessment is implicitly reflected in Sartre’s “Tribute to Camus,” written shortly after the latter’s death. There he writes that “[t]his Descartes of the Absurd refused to leave the safe ground of morality and venture on the uncertain paths of practicality.”<sup>75</sup> This critique of Camus’s response to the Algerian question, which was levelled during his lifetime as well, is echoed in *La Chute*. Clamence says of himself that “[w]hen I was threatened, I became not only a judge in turn but even more: an irascible master who wanted, regardless of all laws, to strike down the offender and get him on his knees” (56).

As noted above, echoes such as this have been read as quasi-autobiographical and thus as an ‘auto-critique’ on the part of Camus. Precisely how they are to be understood is one of the many interpretive problems this novel raises. With others, O’Brien understands the novel as a personal confession of sorts. However, he goes further than most in his interpretation. He states that

[u]nder its surface of irony, and occasional blasphemy, *La Chute* is profoundly Christian in its confessional form, in its imagery and above all in its message that it is only through the full recognition of our sinful nature that we can hope for grace. Grace does not, it is true, arrive and the novel ends on what is apparently a pessimistic note. Yet the name of the narrator – that of the forerunner – hints, however teasingly, at the possibility of a sequel. (81)

O’Brien, amongst others, believes Camus may have been on his way to an avowal of Christianity which was foreclosed only by his untimely death. While Christian imagery

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<sup>75</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, “A Tribute to Camus,” in *Critical Essays on Albert Camus*, ed. Bettina L. Knapp, 165.

pervades the novel, beginning with its title, form and the narrator's assumed name, how this is to be understood is also part of the puzzle of the book.

Finally, Camus's personal life was in disarray as well during this period. His wife Francine fell into a clinical depression in the autumn of 1953, lasting until mid-1957, by which time "she had more or less resumed her normal life" (Todd 349). It is said that Camus's affairs with women contributed to her breakdown. While he tried to be discreet, his private life was public knowledge. He himself became depressed and increasingly concerned that he was becoming creatively sterile. Sometime between February and September of 1952, he wrote in his notebook that "[t]he one thing that has always saved me amid all my prostrations is that I have never stopped believing in what, for lack of anything better, I will call 'my star.' But today, I no longer believe in it" (NB/51: 47). This sense of loss coincided with the Jeanson-Sartre debacle. On January 18, 1956, just before his lecture in Algiers, he writes in his notebook, "I've recovered the star" (NB/51: 167); and in May of that same year, *La Chute* was published.

*A literal image of the wager: An introduction to La Chute*

This novel is generally considered as all but unremittingly dark and as such, according to Brian Fitch in *The Fall: A Matter of Guilt*, "Camus's novel puts in question all of the author's previous works, recasting them in a new light" (Fitch 9). He asserts that the existentialism of *L'Étranger* and the humanism of *La Peste*, both of which show light at the end of the tunnel, are overshadowed by the cynicism of *La Chute*. Fitch thereby concludes that this 'un-Camusian' work can be understood only in terms of the context in which it was written (Fitch 110). He asserts that without the controversy with

Sartre and Jeanson, “Camus’ most enigmatic and most fascinating work, *La Chute*, would never have seen the light of day.”<sup>76</sup> I suggest that while this controversy may have been the catalyst for the book, it was not its source.

In the notebook entry of June 17, 1947, Camus projects the cycles to follow those of the Absurd and Revolt. After the ‘3<sup>rd</sup>’, he merely writes “The Judgment – The first man” (NB/42: 103). In an entry of May 27, 1950, he identifies the projected third cycle simply as “The Myth of Nemesis” (NB/42: 168). The last plan he wrote for his works before his death appears in his notebook in early-to-mid-1954. There he writes, “Before the third stage: short stories for “A Hero of our Times.” Themes of judgment and exile. The third stage is love: the First Man, Don Faust. The myth of Nemesis. The method is sincerity” (NB/51: 172). The theme of judgment, which Camus noted in 1947, clearly precedes the controversy that followed the publication of *L’Homme révolté*, though with Fitch and most other commentators, the episode cannot be ignored in an analysis of *La Chute*. The question is, of course, the role that it plays.

‘A Hero of our Times,’ a title which echoes that of a novel by Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov, was one among many working titles for *La Chute*, originally intended as a short story to be included in a collection Camus published in 1957 entitled *L’Exil et le royaume*. *La Chute* opens with a nod to Lermontov’s work in the epigraph. Of his novel, Lermontov writes,

Some were dreadfully insulted, and quite seriously, to have held up as a model such an immoral character as *A Hero of Our Time*; others shrewdly noticed that the

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<sup>76</sup> Brian T. Fitch, *The Narcissistic Text* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), xiv. It should be noted here that this is the only citation from this book in the thesis. As such, all other references to Fitch in the body of this paper are from his text *The Fall: A Matter of Guilt*.

author had portrayed himself and his acquaintances.... *A Hero of Our Time*, gentlemen, is in fact a portrait, but not of an individual; it is the aggregate of the vices of our whole generation in their fullest expression.<sup>77</sup>

And as is also generally agreed by commentators, *La Chute* draws a portrait of the modern bourgeois man whom Camus saw as ridden with guilt. Given the verisimilitude of the character of Clamence, which echoes aspects of Camus's character and life, what tends to be obscured is the story Clamence is simultaneously relating through his confession – that of the genesis of modern Western man who is marked by an inability to trust himself and others. According to Camus, this translates into a world of judgment in which love is absent. In a notebook entry in 1947, he claims that “[t]hey reproach us with creating abstract men. But it is because the man we take as our model is abstract – knowing nothing of love...” (NB/42: 111). And in late 1954 or early 1955, he writes, “The life (empty) of cities and unbearable days without love. For ten years it has interested me more than anything else in the world” (NB/51: 133).

Again, the confessional form of the novel tends to be taken either in earnest, by those such as O'Brien, or as being an uneasy mixture of the personal and the parodic, as for instance by Fitch and King, however differently. Fitch asserts that *La Chute*, ‘the least classical’ of Camus's novels, is ‘his most personal creation’ (Fitch 10). And King states that

[a]lthough *La Chute* does not represent a radical change in Camus's philosophy, it does create a darker and more pessimistic atmosphere than his earlier works.... [It] shows only false solutions.... The bitterness lying beneath the comedy and the refusal to formulate a more positive attitude are perhaps the clearest indications of the extent to which Camus changed as a result of his experiences after the War. (93)

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<sup>77</sup> Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1956). References to this text will be cited simply by page number in this chapter. Later citations will appear in the body of the paper as F. [*La Chute*. Paris: Gallimard, 1956.]



Unlike Fitch, King sees continuity between this work and the rest of Camus's corpus. Indeed, she sees in it a deep affinity with *L'Homme révolté* in particular, which I believe is the case as well. She interprets Clamence's revolt against the recognition of his guilt, which he can only assume by the negation of all innocence, as being similar to that of the Luciferian revolt of the Romantics. As noted in chapter four of this paper, in light of Augustine's doctrine of original sin, to their logic God 'claims all the goodness of man.' Thus they 'refuse goodness and choose evil' (R 47). In short, King reads *La Chute* as a study of one of the possible excesses of revolt which Camus discloses in Modernity's rebellion (85).

Still, both Fitch and King interpret this novel as being confessional, at least to some degree. As does Girard in his article "Camus's Stranger Retired," however implicitly. He interprets *La Chute* as Camus's recognition of the 'bad faith' which underlies *L'Étranger*, in which he wants to prove that 'the judges are always wrong.' Again, Girard writes that "Camus 'sincerely' believed in his and, consequently, in Meursault's innocence, because he passionately believed in the guilt of the 'judges'" (90). According to Girard, it is on this basis that Camus established "the foundation for an 'authentic' ethical life" (81). Hence his need for an 'innocent murder' and the 'structural flaw' which supports it. Girard argues that, conversely, "*La Chute* openly derides this tenet. It is natural, therefore, to conclude that the work contains an element of self-criticism" (81). In short, while a critique of judgment is still present in *La Chute*, through an 'existential conversion' Camus overcomes his bad faith – Clamence recognizes that he, too, judges, whereas Meursault does not (105).

Yet in the publisher's blurb Camus wrote for the novel, he refers to Clamence's confession as 'calculated.'<sup>78</sup> And his distaste for public confessions is evidenced in both the novel and in the public address of November 1948 entitled "Le Témoin de la Liberté." In the latter piece, Camus writes about the modern artist who is asked to justify his activity in the midst of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's misery. He asserts that "[w]e are thus dragged into a lay confession, the worst of all" (A/I 185). Finally, in *La Chute*, on the last day of their conversation, Clamence tells the interlocutor that

I have ceased to like anything but confessions, and authors of confessions write especially to avoid confessing, to tell nothing of what they know. When they claim to get to painful admissions, you have to watch out, for they are about to dress the corpse. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. (120)

As will be seen below, within the context of the narrative Clamence is stating the truth with a lie as he often does. He is in fact telling the interlocutor the truth about his public confession, as will be revealed to the latter shortly, but in such a manner that he simultaneously disclaims it, at least at this point.

I believe the inspiration and source for the confessional form this story takes is much older than the controversy with Sartre and Jeanson. In an entry written in December 1937, shortly after completing his dissertation on Augustine, Camus summarizes various ideas he finds in Oswald Spengler's introduction to *The Decline of the West*. I will cite the passage of interest from Spengler and then Camus's paraphrase which, in fact, alters the sense of it.

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<sup>78</sup> Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel That Ended It* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 196. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Aronson.

In a comparison of the ‘world consciousness’ of the Classical Greek culture with that of Western civilization, Spengler writes that

a work of deep self-examination, the *Vita Nuova* of Dante, is found at the very outset of the spiritual history of the West. How little therefore of the Classical pure-present there really was in Goethe, the man who forgot nothing, the man whose works, as he avowed himself, are only fragments of a *single great confession!*<sup>79</sup>

The mythic consciousness is marked by an ‘ahistorical mode of life and thought’ (Spengler 23) or a ‘pure-present,’ as opposed to the notions of time, memory and history which become central in the Western ‘world consciousness.’ Camus paraphrases this passage as follows:

The myth, and its anti-psychological meaning. In contrast, what we find at the beginning of the spiritual history of the West is a fragment of self-analysis, and that is the West’s *Vita Nuova*. (Cf. in contrast: the mythical fragments about Heracles, which remain the same from Homer to the tragedies of Seneca. A thousand years. That is to say: Antiquity = the present.) (NB/35: 44)

As Camus interprets it, the emphasis lies on the ‘new life’ or ‘new way’ of the West – that of introspection or the movement of interiority. I suggest he had in mind Augustine’s *Confessions* as opposed to Dante’s works, allowing that Camus believes the spiritual history of the West begins with Augustine’s metaphysics of the Incarnation and the journey of the soul toward God. Again, in his dissertation he examines the shift in cultural consciousness from that of the ‘Greek man’ to the ‘Christian.’ In *L’Homme révolté* he examines what he interprets as the effects of this cultural shift on the historical plane. In *La Chute*, I believe he examines the shift on both the plane of the individual and that of the culture. And, just as the spiritual history of Western civilization can be said to

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<sup>79</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 14.

have opened with Augustine's confession, so it potentially closes with that of Clamence's, which can be identified loosely as a portrait of the 'last man.'<sup>80</sup>

*La Chute: A calculated confession*

As noted above, *La Chute* is a monologue in the guise of a dialogue. It consists in six chapters or five days – the length of time it takes for Jean-Baptiste Clamence, under his assumed name, to complete his confession and to explain his reasons for it. The setting is Amsterdam in the autumn, with its almost constant fog and concentric canals which Clamence likens to the circles of Dante's hell. Toward the end of the first evening, he says to his interlocutor, "[t]he middle class hell, of course, peopled with bad dreams.... Here we are in the last circle. The circle of the ... Ah, you know that. By heaven, you become harder to classify" (14). The interlocutor is familiar with Dante's ninth circle of hell, the last and largest, which is peopled with those who have committed treason. Clamence tells him that the centre of things is Amsterdam though it lies on the tip of the continent. People come from the four corners of Europe, he says, and after being chilled to the bone by the fog, "they come and ask in all languages for gin at *Mexico City*. There I wait for them" (15). He largely repeats himself on the last day, telling the stranger that "I lie in wait particularly for the bourgeois, and the straying bourgeois at that" (138-9), who, like the interlocutor, generally find their way to *Mexico*

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<sup>80</sup> There are both direct and oblique references to Nietzsche's works throughout this novel, in particular to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For example, Clamence refers to himself as a 'superman' and he claims that all that will be needed to say of modern man is that 'he read the newspaper and fornicated.' Such a summary statement echoes Nietzsche's dismissal of 'the last man.' And in the fourth chapter of *La Chute*, the section in *Zarathustra* entitled "On the Spirit of Gravity" is alluded to, in, for example, a reference to the animal tamer and morality. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider this aspect of the novel in any detail, but it should be noted here.

*City Bar*. With the end of the narrative returning to the beginning, the very structure of the novel is, at least in part, thereby patterned on the concentric circles of Dante's hell.<sup>81</sup>

*On the first day*

The novel opens with Clamence offering his services to the interlocutor, a French stranger, in the seedy *Mexico City* where the proprietor speaks only Dutch and largely serves sailors, pimps and prostitutes.<sup>82</sup> Once a well-respected Parisian lawyer whose 'speciality was in noble cases' such as the defence of orphans and widows, Clamence has since made *Mexico City* his informal place of business as both legal counsellor for the bar's clientele and in his profession of 'judge-penitent.' Erudite, urbane and sardonic, Clamence immediately engages his compatriot to whom he refers initially as *monsieur* and *mon cher compatriote*. As the days pass, the measure of their growing intimacy is indicated by the manner in which Clamence addresses his interlocutor. On the second day he refers to him as *cher monsieur* and by the fourth day he uses the term *cher ami*. Thereafter he alternates between such locutions as *mon cher*, *tres cher* and *cher*, until on the last day, in his last address, he refers to him as *cher maître*. As will be seen, this indicates a new form of intimacy between the two as they prepare to part.

On the first evening Clamence is engaging and elliptic. He briefly introduces himself as having once been a lawyer but now a judge-penitent, though he does not elaborate upon this latter function except to say that "[m]y profession is double..., like

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<sup>81</sup> The echo of Sartre's play, *No Exit*, resounds here. Throughout this novel there are a great many intertextual references, both to Camus's own corpus and to the works of others.

<sup>82</sup> According to King, Camus wrote part of *La Chute* while sitting in the *Mexico City Bar* in Amsterdam "and had sent the management a copy of *La Chute*. At the time of Camus's visit, the bar was managed by a muscular ex-sailor who spoke only Dutch." (91)

the human being” (10). He intrigues the stranger, appealing to his wit, curiosity and, implicitly, to his vanity. At a point Clamence uses the subjunctive to which the stranger responds with a smile. On the basis of his appearance and demeanour, Clamence deduces that the stranger is a ‘cultured bourgeois,’ much like himself. He notes that “smiling at the use of the subjunctive, in fact, proves your culture twice over because you recognize it to begin with and then because you feel superior to it” (9). Whatever we learn about the stranger, which is very little, we know only through Clamence’s reaction to his responses, such as this one. The interlocutor, who functions solely in terms of a placeholder for the second person pronoun, thus acts much like a cipher into which the reader eventually slips as the conversation continues. And just as the interlocutor becomes increasingly engaged as he listens to Clamence’s confession, so too the reader. As the novel progresses, then, the interlocutor and reader are all but fused into the position of addressee.

Indeed, the verisimilitude with which Camus draws the character of Clamence all but ensured this identification of the contemporary readership. As Fitch points out, a number of statements made by Clamence allude to comments in the correspondence between Jeanson, Sartre and Camus which would have resonated with the readership. For example, Jeanson had referred to Camus as “that great voice soaring above the factions” (Fitch 29). Clamence echoes this in his claim that “soaring over this whole continent which is under my sway without knowing it..., I am happy” (29; 144). And Sartre had asserted that “[i]n order to placate your conscience, you have to condemn, someone has to be guilty: if it isn’t you, then it will be the whole world” (Fitch 29). Clamence all but

quotes this, saying at a point that “each of us insists on being innocent at all costs, even if he has to accuse the whole human race and heaven” (81). The controversy between Sartre and Camus, which was reported in the popular press, would not have been forgotten by 1956. Indeed, apart from the 1954 publication of *L'Été*, a collection of lyrical essays written between 1939 and 1953, and journalistic contributions to *L'Express* from May 1955 until February 1956, Camus had published nothing since *L'Homme révolté* and the polemical pieces which followed. Thus, his readership had long awaited this next work. However, even for those unfamiliar with Camus and his era, this narrative technique serves to render identification with the interlocutor a real possibility.

*On the second day*

On the second evening, the interlocutor returns to the bar to meet Clamence as arranged the previous evening. The chapter begins with Clamence saying, “What is a judge-penitent? Ah, I intrigued you with that business” (17). Clamence asserts that part of his ‘official duties’ as judge-penitent is to explain this function and that he will have to tell the stranger certain facts in order that he understand his story. So begins the confession.

In this chapter he speaks of his former life in Paris as a lawyer championing the causes of orphans and widows and of the criminal element, “on the sole condition that they should be noble murderers, as others are noble savages” (19).<sup>83</sup> Of his prior life, he says that he felt himself a ‘complete man,’ to the point that he “looked upon [himself] as something of a superman” (28). In the description of his past life and character, the resonances with Camus’s character and interests would not have been missed by the

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<sup>83</sup> Most commentators assert that the concept of ‘the noble savage’ is an allusion to *L'Étranger*. It has also been suggested that it may well allude to the philosophy of Rousseau which inspired the French revolutionaries, as discussed in chapter four of this paper. It is likely an echo of both.

readership either. Clamence, like Camus, “was of respectable but humble birth” (28). While Clamence’s father was an officer, and Camus’s a foot soldier in WWI, their origins are similar. And prior to his becoming a judge-penitent, Clamence appears to be much like the Camus of the early lyrical essays. Clamence asserts that

few creatures were more natural than I. I was altogether in harmony with life, fitting into it from top to bottom without rejecting any of its ironies, its grandeur, or its servitude. In particular the flesh, matter, the physical in short, which disconcerts so many men in love or in solitude, without enslaving me, brought me steady joys. I was made to have a body. (28)

He claims that “I was acceptable in appearance; I revealed myself to be both a tireless dancer and an unobtrusively learned man; I managed to love simultaneously – and this is not easy – women and justice; I indulged in sports and the fine arts” (27), specifically acting. Camus had said of himself that everything he knew about morality had been learned on the playing field. And he never felt more at home than in the theatre, in which he was a playwright, director and actor. Clamence also notes his charm with women, by which he means “a way of getting the answer yes without having asked any clear question” (56-7). Finally, Clamence, like Camus, has a liking for ‘fine speech’ and an “instinctive scorn for judges in general” (18). While further parallels could be drawn, the similarities listed are adequate to establish the likeness between Camus and the character he creates. It is enough to note here that Clamence appears to be all but the shadow of Camus. It should be said as well, however, that while many of the so-called ‘self-references’ are ironic, others are all but vicious, such as the following.

Clamence says of himself that “it was enough for me to sniff the scent of victim on a defendant for me to swing into action. And what action! A real tornado! My heart



was on my sleeve. You would really have thought that justice slept with me every night” (17). As he fought on the side of the defendant, Clamence felt himself to be ‘on the right side’ and thus as being above both the accused and the judges. The former owed him gratitude and he himself could judge the latter, about whom he says he “could not understand how a man could offer himself to perform such a surprising function” (18). Thus he experienced a sense of self-esteem, of which, he says, if one is deprived, one is ‘transformed into a dog frothing with rage.’

He was esteemed by colleagues and the general public, as well, as his reputation was impeccable and his generosity recognized. He ‘never charged a fee and never boasted of it,’ nor did he curry the favour of politicians or journalists. He helped the blind cross the street, gave up his seat on the bus and was pleased when there was a transit strike as he could offer lifts to strangers. He says that he performed more of these deeds than others as he paid more attention and ‘was better able to relish the pleasure they gave.’ In all things he was generous, but enjoyed being the ‘master of his liberalities’ as he ‘hated to be obliged.’ He notes that he is not bragging, but simply indicating that he was ‘aiming for something higher than the general avidity of society.’ Of this way of life he says that it is “achieving more than the vulgar ambitious man and rising to that supreme height where virtue is its own reward” (23). Indeed, he admits that he “needed to feel *above*” (23) in his professional and daily life to the point that he preferred mountains to valleys and buses and taxis to the subway. In light of this need, he “could readily understand why sermons, decisive preachings, and fire miracles took place on accessible heights” (24). This need for heights will later be reflected in the depth of

Clamence's fall and the provisional form of redemption he devises. As opposed to preaching from a height, however, he sermonizes as the lowest of the low throughout his monologue.

So complete was the life he led, both personally and professionally, that he neither felt he had merited it nor that "the conjunction in a single person of such different and such extreme virtues was the result of chance alone" (29). Indeed, he felt 'marked out.' He says that "[t]his is why in my happy life I felt somehow that that happiness was authorized by some higher decree. When I add that I had no religion you can see even better how extraordinary that conviction was" (29). This life he says was Eden as he was in harmony with himself and others effortlessly, naturally, as if 'having known how to live at birth.' Thus, he says, "I soared until that evening when... But no, that's another matter and it must be forgotten" (29).

He does note, however, that perhaps he is exaggerating as he was 'at ease in everything but satisfied with nothing.' He sought one festivity after another until 'that evening when the music stopped and the lights went out.' It is at this point that he asks for the interlocutor's understanding, which takes the latter by surprise. Clamence asks him if he has never felt the sudden need for 'understanding, help, friendship,' and then concedes that he himself has 'learned to be satisfied with understanding as it is more readily found and not binding.' Clamence then offers disquisitions on friendship and family, during which the interlocutor asks twice about 'that evening,' thereby indicating his degree of involvement. And Clamence says twice that he has never really left his subject. Such disquisitions, which Clamence will later call digressions, give the

interlocutor glimpses of Clamence which should give him pause and later do. Toward the end, just before ‘the music stops and the lights go out,’ the interlocutor cannot help but recall the comments he largely let slide as the conversation progressed. But his complicity is, by that point, sealed.

Of friendship, Clamence laments the work involved in cementing it and the obligation it entails. He notes that friends never call on the evening you are contemplating suicide, but only on the evening when all is well with the world. And as for suicide, he adds, “they would be more likely to push you to it, by virtue of what you owe to yourself, according to them” (31). Of family, Clamence echoes Sartre’s quip that ‘words are bullets’ and that family is assured of taking good aim. He then tells a story of a man he knew whose friend was imprisoned. The former promised to sleep on the floor every night until his friend was released. Clamence asks the interlocutor, “Who, *cher monsieur*, will sleep on the floor for us? Whether I am capable of it myself? Look, I’d like to be and one day I shall be. Yes, we shall all be capable of it one day and that will be salvation” (32). He surmises that perhaps most of are incapable of such a friendship in which one overcomes the self for the other, either because ‘we don’t want it enough’ or because “[m]aybe we don’t love life enough” (32).

Death alone, he says ‘awakens our feelings, and then the show begins.’ This is our ‘little transcendence.’ We express our love for the friend we have recently lost, especially if by suicide, and our admiration for the teacher who is now buried, rather than during their lifetime. Our ‘justice and generosity toward the dead’ is due to the fact that “with them there is no obligation. They leave us free and we can take our time, fit the

testimonial in between a cocktail party and a nice little mistress, in our spare time, in short” (32-3). Finally he says that “it is the recently dead we love among our friends, the painful dead, our emotion, ourselves after all!” (33) And this because “[t]hat’s the way man is... he has two faces: he can’t love without self-love” (35). According to Clamence, most human commitments are the result of boredom. He thus exclaims that “[s]omething must happen, even loveless slavery, even war or death. Hurray then for funerals!” (37)

With this, Clamence finally arrives at ‘that evening’ for which the interlocutor has been waiting. He says that unlike those who suffer boredom, he had no excuse as he was ‘riding at the top of a crest.’ He had had a particularly good day as he had helped a blind man, done well in court, indulged in a ‘few liberalities’ and had enjoyed “a brilliant improvisation in the company of several friends on the hardheartedness of our governing class and the hypocrisy of our leaders” (38). Later that same autumn evening, pausing as he crossed a bridge and feeling like he ‘dominated the island,’ he says he had felt rising within him “a vast feeling of power and... of completion” (38). Just as he was about to light a ‘cigarette of satisfaction,’ he heard a laugh burst out behind him. Taken by surprise, he turned to find its source but there was neither boat nor barge on the river. He turned back, but again heard it behind him “a little farther off as if it were going downstream” (39). He stood motionless, he says, and “was aware of the rapid beating of [his] heart” (39). As it was a natural, friendly laugh, he soon put things into perspective and wandered home. Later still on the same evening, he heard laughter below his window, but this time saw a group of friends saying goodnight. He then went to the

bathroom for water, where, he says, “[m]y reflection was smiling in the mirror, but it seemed to me that my smile was double” (40).

*On the third day*

The third chapter, much like the second, opens with Clamence alluding to the interest of the interlocutor. He thanks him for his ‘curiosity,’ adding that ‘there is nothing extraordinary about my story, however.’ He says he thought about the laugh for a few days and then largely forgot it, though he ‘ceased to walk along the Paris quays’ and when crossing the Seine in a bus or taxi, a ‘silence descended on him.’ At that time he began to feel a slight ‘dejection’ and ‘life became less easy.’ He notes that “when the body is sad the heart languishes” (42) and that he seemed to be forgetting “what [he] had never learned and yet knew so well – how to live” (42-3). He admits that this was when ‘everything began.’ What begins is the slow disintegration of the image Clamence had of himself until ‘that evening.’

As Clamence is not ‘feeling quite up to snuff’ this evening either, he suggests that they take a walk. As they wander through town, he points out the edifice of a house on the top of which are ‘the heads of Negro slaves,’ a relic from an ‘age with assurance.’ He compares it with the current era when, he says, such an attitude toward slavery would be a scandal, though it is ‘natural’ that we “should be forced to establish it in our homes or in our factories..., but boasting about it, that’s the limit!” (44) So begins a disquisition on this age’s will to domination in the guise of freedom, an echo of Camus’s argument in *L’Homme révolté*. Power, says Clamence, ‘settles everything,’ which European philosophy has at last recognized. In the past, we used to offer an opinion and ask for the

other's objections, but such dialogue leads solely to more questions. Thus "[f]or the dialogue we have substituted the communiqué: 'This is the truth,' we say" (45). Clamence's narrative, a monologue in the guise of a dialogue, is then a literal image of this understanding of modern communication. And his confession, as will be seen, is precisely a will to power. Just as in *L'Étranger* and *La Peste*, form and content are seamless in *La Chute*. I will return to this later in the chapter. It need only be pointed out at present.

Clamence adds that now "we know ourselves; we know now of what we are capable" (45). He also notes that he prefers those who serve him do it with a smile, otherwise it upsets his day. He says that "isn't it better that whoever cannot do without having slaves should call them free men?" (46) It saves them from despair and "in that way, they will continue to smile and we shall maintain our good conscience" (46). Hence the lack of clear signage in this age such as the 'heads of Negro slaves.' He asks the interlocutor to imagine having signs which 'displayed one's true profession and identity.' He claims that his would have "a double face, a charming Janus, and above it the motto of the house: 'Don't rely on it'" (47); and on his business cards, "Jean-Baptiste Clamence, play actor" (47). He asks the interlocutor what his would be, adding, "you'll tell me later on" (47). This latter locution is repeated almost refrain-like throughout *La Chute*, the significance of which becomes clear toward the end of the confession.

Clamence then proceeds to tell him of the discoveries he began to make after the incident on the bridge. He realized that after helping a blind man cross the street, he would tip his hat which, he says, was for none other than the public. And on being

thanked by a motorist for an act of kindness, Clamence responded with a slip of the tongue, saying “no one would have done as much” (47). He says he realized that he was ‘always bursting with vanity,’ the constant refrain being ‘I, I, I.’ And he adds that “I admitted only superiorities in me and this explained my good will and serenity” (48). Other incidents came back to him as he slowly began to recover his memory, before which he had a ‘prodigious ability to forget.’ He claims that unlike those whose “religion consists in forgiving all offences, and who do in fact forgive them but never forget them” (49), he did not forgive. Rather, he simply forgot. For example, he would be pleasant with someone who had previously insulted him only because he had forgotten them and the incident altogether. As such, he says he “progressed on the surface of life, in the realm of words as it were, never in reality.... I went through the gestures out of boredom or absent-mindedness” (50). But “gradually... my memory returned. Or rather, I returned to it, and in it I found the recollection that was awaiting me” (51). Otherwise said, Clamence enters upon a new way – he begins the movement of interiority.

Prior to getting to the incident at the centre of his memory, however, he relates two others at great length, both of which revealed to Clamence that his need of an admirable self-image was coupled with a desire to dominate. Both anecdotes concern his ‘collapse in public.’ In the first, he was cut off by a motorcyclist who promptly stalled in front of him at a light. When the light turned green and the other motorists began honking, he politely asked that the man move his bike. The latter, in frustration, told him to ‘climb a tree.’ Still polite but becoming irritable, Clamence persisted. The man threatened Clamence and as such ‘cynicism filled him with a healthy rage,’ he decided to

give the man a good thrashing. A bystander came forward in defence of the man sitting on the bike who was thus at a disadvantage, said something to Clamence just as the motorist drove off, and hit him. In a daze and with horns honking, Clamence simply returned to his car and left, overhearing someone say of him ‘poor dope’ as he did.

For several days afterward, he repeatedly played the scene in his imagination as he felt it should have gone, with him defeating both the motorcyclist and his defender. When he recalled this incident, he says he realized what it had meant – that his ‘dream did not live up to reality.’ He had ‘felt himself a complete man, respected in his person and profession.’ He had wanted to be admired not only for his intelligence but for his physical prowess as well, to which he felt this incident gave lie. In short, he says that he ‘wanted to dominate in all things’ and that after recalling this incident, he could no longer ‘cherish that fine picture’ of himself. The resentment he felt indicated to him that what he had truly desired was to rule as the strongest, not as the most intelligent, else wise he would have let the incident go. He tells the interlocutor that

I learned at least that I was on the side of the guilty, the accused, only in exactly so far as their crime caused me no harm.... When I was threatened, I became not only a judge in turn but even more: an irascible master who wanted, regardless of all laws, to strike down the offender and get him on his knees. (55-6)

Following this, his vocation for ‘justice’ began to appear suspect to him.

The second anecdote concerns his relationships with women, in which sensuality dominated, or rather the physical he says, as ‘sensuality is not repulsive.’ A bachelor and womanizer, he discovered that he needed only to be assured of a woman’s commitment to him, after which he felt free to begin to drift. He later heard that one particular woman had made comments about his inadequacies, which implied another sort of collapse in



public. He seduced her again in order to regain the upper hand. They entered into a sado-masochistic relationship in which he repeatedly drew her near, mortified her, and then abandoned her. She ‘confessed her enslavement’ the evening she told him she loved him. He tells the interlocutor that “I had proved my point once and for all and assured my power for a long time” (62-2). He was thereby freed of her as well. But, as ‘one can never be sure,’ he would begin anew with someone else, often maintaining several liaisons at the same time – both the old and the new.

Insofar as “no man is a hypocrite in his pleasures” (66), what he discovered through this incident was his real desire. It was, he says, “to be loved and to receive what in my opinion was due me. The moment I was loved and my partner again forgotten, I shone, I was at the top of my form, I became likeable” (67). He was happy only when he was at the centre with as many as possible turned toward him. He says, “in short, for me to live happily it was essential for the creatures I chose not to live at all. They must receive their life, sporadically, only at my bidding” (68). While the interlocutor had dismissed the prior incident, to this one he responds with a ‘polite silence.’ Clarence agrees that the ‘adventure is not very pretty,’ but he claims that he was at least more honest in his private life where ‘he had declared who he was and how he could live,’ than in his “great professional flights about innocence and justice” (65-6). He then asks the interlocutor to “[s]earch your memory and perhaps you will find some similar story that you’ll tell me later” (65).

He says at a point that

I don’t know how to name the odd feeling that comes over me. Isn’t it shame perhaps? Tell me, *mon cher compatriote*, doesn’t shame sting a little? It does? Well, it’s

probably shame, then, or one of those silly emotions that have to do with honor. It seems to me in any case that that feeling has never left me since the adventure I found at the heart of my memory. (68-9)

With this reference to his sense of shame, Clamence arrives at ‘that evening’ when the slow disintegration of his self-image began. At the centre of Clamence’s confession and of the novel structurally, the end of the third day concerns what he found ‘at the heart of his memory’ after a long and painful recovery of it. One night in late autumn, as he crossed a bridge he saw a woman leaning on the parapet. He was stirred by her, but moved on after ‘a moment’s hesitation.’ He had gone fifty yards when he “heard the sound... of a body striking the water” (70). He also heard a repeated cry which ‘was going downstream,’ just as the sound of laughter had done a couple of years after this incident. It ‘suddenly ceased,’ followed only by an ‘interminable silence,’ that same silence which descends upon him each time he crosses a bridge in a taxi or bus. He says, “I wanted to run and yet didn’t stir. I was trembling, I believe from the cold and shock. I told myself I had to be quick and I felt an irresistible weakness steal over me” (70). He thought to himself at that point, ‘too late or too far, or something of the sort’ and went home, informing no one.

In response to the interlocutor’s question, he says, “What? That woman? Oh, I don’t know. Really, I don’t know. The next day and the days following, I didn’t read the newspapers” (71). It appears as if Clamence has already forgotten the tale he has just recounted. However, just as Amsterdam is the centre of the world with its concentric circles, so this betrayal of himself and another form the centre point of Clamence’s hell. Unable to assume his act of moral cowardice or to any longer forget it, he stands forever

in the midst of the ninth circle. His fear of death and the consequent abandonment of the body form the heart of his memory. Reduced to his history – time and memory, Clamence is now ‘this.’

Like the modern Western bourgeois of whom Clamence is the portrait, he is a prisoner of consciousness or conscience. This likeness may well be patterned, at least in part, on Augustine’s understanding of memory which he identified as ‘himself.’ In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes, “[t]he power of memory is great, O Lord. It is awe-inspiring in its profound and incalculable complexity. Yet it is my mind: it is my self” (Con 223-24). This ‘vast field’ is the field of Augustine’s labours in his search for God (Con 223; 230). For Clamence, as for Modern man, it is solely the ninth circle. This fear of death and the consequent abandonment of the body underlies the narrative and runs through the whole of the novel like a river, with direct or indirect references to this ‘adventure’ in each chapter. I suggest it is an echo of Camus’s argument in *L’Homme révolté* concerning Christianity’s ‘fight with nature.’ Resulting in a disruption of the original unity of soul and body, it led to the denigration of the latter and to the slow reduction of the creation and man to history. By the end of Modernity, this world has become hell.

*On the fourth day*

They meet on the fourth day at the request of the interlocutor and on the suggestion of Clamence they take a boat trip on the Zuider Zee to visit the island of Marken. Clamence says of its shoreline that it is ‘the most beautiful negative landscape.’ The predominant

colour is grey, from the dunes to the dyke, with ‘the vast sky reflecting the colourless waters.’ Clamence exclaims,

[a] soggy hell, indeed! Everything horizontal, no relief; space is colorless, and life dead. Is it not universal obliteration, everlasting nothingness made visible? No human beings, above all, no human beings! You and I alone facing the planet at last deserted! (72-3)

He tells the interlocutor that he no longer has friends but only accomplices and “[t]o make up for this, their number has increased; they are the whole human race. And within the human race, you first of all. Whoever is at hand is always the first” (73). Clamence tells him that he discovered this the night he considered suicide in order to ‘punish his friends, in a way.’ But he realized that while some might be surprised, none would feel punished. Moreover, it would only be worth the candle if we could be sure that ‘the soul has eyes and we could look on after dying.’ But we cannot be certain, he says,

[o]therwise there would be a solution; at least one could get oneself taken seriously. Men are never convinced of ... the seriousness of your sufferings, except by your death. So long as you are alive, your case is doubtful; you have only a right to their skepticism. (74)

Moreover, he says, I love life too much, that is, ‘I continue to love myself.’ As to the self-discoveries he disclosed to the interlocutor on the third day, Clamence avows that he did not ‘develop an aversion for himself’ for it ‘was especially with others that he was fed up.’ He knew of his failings and continued to forget them. He admits, however, that “the persecution of others, on the contrary, went on constantly in my heart” (76).

This chapter concerns Clamence's attempt to come to terms not as yet with guilt but with judgment, which he recognizes is fundamentally his own as his act of treason is known to him alone. Thus he claims that

above all, the question is to elude judgment. I'm not saying to avoid punishment, for punishment without judgment is bearable. It has a name, besides, that guarantees our innocence: it is called misfortune. No, on the contrary, it's a matter of dodging judgment, of avoiding being forever judged without ever having a sentence pronounced. (76-7)

Here Clamence appears to juxtapose a more Greek understanding of wrongdoing with that to which Western man arrives by the end of Modernity. In the Ancient world, while one was held responsible for having overstepped one's limits, the tragic awareness of existence allowed for both good and bad fortune. This was replaced with the Christian notion of original sin which thereby introduced a final court of appeal. But having overturned the reign of God's justice, there is no longer anything against which we can appeal. Only guilt remains. Clamence will return to this on the fourth and fifth evenings. Here it need only be noted.

After searching his memory and having found that 'maybe he wasn't so admirable,' Clamence realizes that there was something in him to be judged. At this point he became 'distrustful.' He both recognized that 'the very people he helped most often were those he most scorned' and that 'in others there is an irresistible vocation for judging.' He concludes that "people hasten to judge in order not to be judged themselves" (80-1). He also asserts that we feel ourselves innocent as if from our very nature and that 'we all want something to appeal against.' Indeed, "each of us insists on being innocent at all cost, even if he has to accuse the whole human race and heaven

itself” (81). He adds that “[f]rom the evening when I was called – for I really was called – I had to answer or at least seek an answer” (84).

Clarence tells the interlocutor that

after prolonged research on myself, I brought out the fundamental duplicity of the human being. Then I realized, as a result of delving into my memory, that modesty helped me to shine, humility to conquer, and virtue to oppress.... Thus the surface of all my virtues had a less imposing reverse side. (84-5)

Recall here Camus’s discussion of the ‘double life’ of man in *L’Homme révolté*. There he asserts that “[i]mpatience with limits, the rejection of their double life, despair at being a man, have finally driven [Western men] to inhuman excesses” (305). Thus, ‘the human value’ that is found in genuine rebellion, which “stands halfway between innocence and guilt, between reason and irrationality, between history and eternity” (R 171), is gradually overstepped by Clarence. As opposed to accepting the ‘double life’ of man of which he had become aware, Clarence concludes that human nature is fundamentally duplicitous, as did Augustine. Otherwise said, Clarence’s revolt is absolute. Just as the ‘cry of outraged innocence’ which marked the beginning of Modernity’s revolt was overstepped, so too Clarence’s. And he as well enters into inhuman excesses. Whereas he once felt that he had ‘risen to that supreme summit where virtue is its own reward,’ he now reckons that he had used virtue as a weapon. And having once felt in harmony with himself and others, he now says that “I felt vulnerable and open to public accusation. In my eyes my fellows ceased to be the respectful public to which I was accustomed. The circle of which I was the center broke and they lined up in a row as on the judge’s bench” (78). While others greeted him in the same manner as they had before this incident, he now felt as if they were secretly laughing at him.

Still able to forget, though, his life went on as it always had apart from a ‘slight disorder and dissonance’ within himself. However, he began to undergo the experience of the absurd in terms of “the divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting” (MS 13). Thoughts of death began to intrude as well, and he states that he did not want to die with a lie which death would render ‘definitive.’ He says “a ridiculous fear pursued me, in fact: one could not die without having confessed all one’s lies” (89-90), though he admits that today “that absolute murder of a truth... would cause me, instead, subtle joys” (90). In support of this, he obliquely refers to the pleasure he now experiences in having in his home an object he holds in trust for the proprietor of *Mexico City* which is being sought by the police of three countries, the significance of which will be addressed later in this chapter. He then continues, saying that praise from others ‘became more unbearable’ as “[i]t seemed to me that the falsehood increased with them so inordinately that never again could I put myself right” (91). Once again though, he ‘pulled himself together,’ recognizing that it was “pretension to want to drag out into the full light of truth a paltry fraud, lost in the sea of ages like a grain of sand in the ocean!” (90) Moreover, he saw ‘death as punishment enough for all to be absolved.’ For Clamence, “[s]alvation was won (that is, the right to disappear definitively) in the sweat of the death agony” (91). This conception of salvation is a clear echo of the closing words of Meursault in *L’Étranger*, as discussed toward the end of chapter two of this paper.

When he could no longer bear the dissonance within him, he decided to ‘upset the game.’ As he felt himself a liar, he would expose his duplicity before all. He adds that “[i]n order to forestall the laughter, I dreamed of hurling myself into the general derision.

In short it was still a question of dodging judgment. I wanted to put the laughers on my side, or at least to put myself on their side” (91). He attempted to enlighten others as to his nature by, for example, ‘publicly inveighing against the humanitarian spirit;’ by writing about the ‘oppression that the oppressed inflict on decent people;’ and by using the name of God amongst the ‘café atheists’ and during his court summations, which was perceived as a lack of confidence in his own power of persuasion. But this did little more than ‘disconcert’ others and drive away clientele. Worse yet, “the laughter continued to drift ... [his] way” (96), until he discovered the way of the judge-penitent. But first, he notes, he must speak of ‘debauchery and the ‘little-ease,’ that is, of guilt, to which Clamence finally ‘submits.’ Just as he takes a turn in his life at this point, so too does the thrust of his narrative.

*Interlude – Some interpretive issues*

On the whole, commentators note that the resonances with Sartre’s form of existentialism in Clamence’s narrative to this point would not have been missed by Camus’s readership either, especially by Sartre. In fact, Fitch argues that there is a “two-tiered communicative chain operative in the novel, the first involving Sartre and Francis Jeanson and the second *The Fall*’s other readers” (Fitch 17). For example, the type of freedom preferred by Clamence prior to his ‘fall’ is all but absolute. Indeed, he says at a point that “[a]t breakfast I used to spread [freedom] on my toast, I used to chew it all day long.... With that key word I would bludgeon whoever contradicted me. I made it serve my desires and my power” (132). This emphasis on (all but absolute) freedom is more reminiscent of Sartre’s original insistence on the primacy of human freedom than with



Camus's notion of a relative freedom. Indeed, according to Fitch, it is a parody of Sartre's interpretation of freedom. In contrast to the latter's conception of freedom, Camus asserts that the other's experience in revolt, that of an inchoate sense of justice and liberty and thus of a right, is the limit of mine. Thus human freedom is not absolute but relative. In *L'Homme révolté* he writes that

[f]ar from demanding general independence, the rebel wants it to be recognized that freedom has its limits everywhere that a human being is to be found – the limit being precisely that human being's power to rebel. (284)

As such, the corollary to 'I rebel, therefore we exist' is the other's right to rebel. For Sartre, my 'being for others' is ultimately understood in terms of 'the self as object' and as such shame is the fundamental basis of the relationship between the self and other. Through this emotion the self is given to the self and simultaneously the existence of the other is thereby established. Note that it is precisely the 'public collapse' of Clamence's self-image that causes him distress as he begins to recover his memory. In light of this, Fitch asserts that the experience of shame to which Clamence attests is an echo of this aspect of Sartre's philosophy (Fitch 31-32).

Consider too Clamence's description of the 'negative landscape' at the start of the fourth day during their visit to Marken Island. It appears to be a literal image of Sartre's concept of the 'nothingness of consciousness' which is considered to be 'distinct and free from the world it inhabits.' That is, it is a literal image of the primacy of nothingness. Sartre's understanding of consciousness presupposes the principle of subjectivity 'discovered' by Descartes, of whom Clamence later speaks. The description of the landscape serves, then, as both a literal image of the 'disembodied thought' of Europe

which Camus decries in *L'Homme révolté* and of the nihilism which it presupposes, that is, of the 'disbelief in what exists.' It is 'everlasting nothingness made visible, with no human beings, above all.' For Sartre, the individual considered in terms of consciousness is reduced to his 'situation' for which he alone is responsible, though as it is judged by others it becomes part of one's sense of self. Thus, Sartre claims at a point that 'hell is other people.' Recall that Clamence asserts he did not develop an aversion for himself, particularly, but rather 'it was with others that he was especially fed up.' And, of course, his primary task is to elude judgment.

It is also largely agreed, then, that the portrait of the 'bourgeois man' drawn in *La Chute* has greater affinities with the Sartrean description of the 'bourgeois consciousness' than with that of Camus's absurdist philosophy, though Camus had been identified with the 'existentialist school' as noted in chapter one. Through its caricature in this novel, Camus "makes of this work a kind of cautionary tale pointing out the dangers of the Sartrean form of existentialism" (Fitch 32) and, I suggest, he claims his distance from this school yet again. According to Fitch and others, what Camus does is effectively turn the tables on Sartre and Jeanson through this parody of the Sartrean 'bourgeois consciousness.' Most commentators also hold that the portrait Camus draws of himself in this novel is that of "Camus... seen through Sartre's eyes" (Fitch 33). Fitch asserts that "[t]his was his way of getting back at them, leading them to see in the character a portrait of its author and subsequently turning the tables by revealing the apparent self-portrait to be but a caricature, and a gross one at that" (33). *La Chute* is thus 'a confession which turns into an accusation.' By the end of reading the novel, these particular readers would

be thrown into the role of ‘penitent.’ They have judged ‘the penitent’ and are made aware of having done so. They are now the accused, that is, the penitent. As such, it is their turn to confess to the penitent become judge and be judged, if they so choose. *La Chute* is therefore an object lesson in the experience of judgment and guilt which Clamence describes through his confession. It thereby extends beyond the ‘specific readers,’ Sartre and company, to its ‘other readers’ as well.

If ‘turning the tables’ were the crux of the novel Camus would be solely a man of ‘resentment.’ Fitch, with others, argues that Camus’s text falls into the tradition of the French *moralistes*, “stretching back to the sixteenth century” (105), as opposed to that of the *littérature de circonstance*, which would limit it to the particular context and circumstances in which it were written (33). And, the open ending of the novel leads “every reader of *The Fall*... [to] his or her own personal continuation to the mechanism of self-doubt that the work has set in motion. It is up to the reader whether the evolution of this gnawing self-doubt is ever to come to rest” (105). In short, Fitch claims that the novel invites the reader to ‘self-scrutiny and self-interpretation.’

Alternatively, King asserts that “[i]f there is a recognition in *La Chute* that moral guilt exists, there is also a recognition that man’s feelings of guilt can be manipulated to justify despotism. If there is self-criticism in *La Chute*, there is a much stronger and more severe attack on those who criticised Camus” (88). The ‘turning of the tables’ stands with King’s interpretation of the novel as “an illustration of the perversion of rebellion in the contemporary world” (85). She reads it as a critique of Sartre’s political philosophy, specifically, and more generally of the “position of the left-wing intellectuals who

attempt to justify the politics of the Soviet Union” (89), of which Sartre’s existential Marxism is part. As King points out, in Camus’s first letter to *Les temps modernes*, he claims that “[t]here is, in fact, repentance in the case of these bourgeois intellectuals who want to expiate their origins, even at the price of contradiction and violence to their intelligence” (King 89-90; A/II 113). As noted in chapter three of this paper, while the French Left critiqued the West, they remained silent and demanded silence regarding the violations of justice perpetrated by the Communist regime. King argues that “[a]ccording to Camus, Sartre’s revolt is perverted by a feeling of guilt, which makes him afraid of liberty” (90). Thus, in Sartre’s ‘conversion’ to political Marxism, and in distinction from his original existentialist stance, he subscribes to the determinism of history which precludes “any need for personal freedom of choice” (90). In line with his analysis in *L’Homme révolté*, Camus asserts that “according to the law of nihilism, [Sartre moves] from extreme liberty to extreme necessity; this is nothing else but dedicating oneself to making slaves” (King 90; A/II 117).<sup>84</sup>

I suggest that the two readings of *La Chute* – one which sees in it the tradition of the *moralistes*, the other a more strictly political commentary, need not be considered as mutually exclusive. Camus’s understanding of the relationship of the personal and the social/political, as discussed in chapter three of this paper, precludes such a neat division. Like the Greeks, Camus holds that the ‘good life’ cannot be considered in abstraction from the social and political realities within which the individual is situated. While it is false to say that for Camus the personal is purely social and/or political, it is true to say

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<sup>84</sup> For King’s references to *Actuelles II*, in *Œuvres complètes* see pp. 251 and 252, respectively.

that politics are deeply personal, as is our social being, at the best of times at any rate. Again, according to Camus, revolt begins with the individual. Having reached her conclusions, the rebel then attempts to introduce them into history – be they marked by despair or by the recognition of our common suffering. For Camus, then, there is a seamlessness between the positions of *moraliste* and political analyst as his fundamental concern is with how we are to live. As he writes in the *Combat* editorial of August 29, 1944, “[t]here are times... when morality comes back into politics, because men suddenly start paying for their politics with their blood” (19). In short, for Camus, “politics and morality are interdependent” (*Combat* 24).

Of the interpretations of the echoes of Sartre’s philosophy in *La Chute*, I am more sympathetic with the general direction that King’s understanding of guilt represents than with that of Fitch’s. Fitch concludes that in *La Chute*, and in the role of a *moraliste*, Camus provides “a veritable inventory of the foibles of modern man and a merciless account of the society they have given rise to” (122). Still, Fitch appears to consider the function of the novel primarily in personal terms, that is, in light of the ‘gnawing self-doubt’ that the novel evinces in the reader which thereby invites him or her to ‘self-scrutiny and self-interpretation.’ With King, I believe Camus’s concern lies with the possibility of the tyranny of guilt and the servitude which results, both personally and collectively. She concludes that “*La Chute* mocks the moral tragedy of contemporary life [... and that] Clamence’s story is an image of the dangers inherent in the metaphysical aspirations of contemporary political philosophy” (93). I take issue with her analysis, however, insofar as it limits Camus’s critique to Modernity and to his contemporary

political situation. With Fitch, I believe the open ending of *La Chute* is a challenge to the reader. Recall that King reads this novel as presenting ‘only false solutions.’ It does not appear that she takes into account the open-endedness of *La Chute* which, I believe, is more readily recognized by those who consider the novel as belonging to the tradition of the *moraliste*. But as to what the reader is being challenged is another question. I will return to this toward the end of the chapter. At present, of interest is what I believe is the larger story Clamence is telling during his confession which, as I noted earlier in this chapter, appears to all but occluded in his very telling of it – a genesis myth of modern Western man who is marked by an inability to trust himself and others.

In August of 1957, Camus writes in his notebook,

A comment about *The Fall* since they do not understand. Shaped by and ridiculing the modern attitude and this strange and salacious secular remorse of sin. Cf. Chesterton “The XIX century (id. the XXth) is full of Christian ideas gone mad. (NB/51: 192)

I believe that the ‘turning of the tables’ can be, but best not be considered apart from the genealogy of modern man which Camus outlines in the last two chapters of *La Chute*. In short, and as will be considered below, just as Camus outlines Modernity’s repetition of the Christian myth in *L’Homme révolté*, however degraded it is in its recapitulation, so he traces the same trajectory here. I suggest that in *La Chute*, he creates a literal image of this historical process and its effects.

Arguably, the conception of this plan appears in a notebook entry in 1954. There Camus writes,

December 14. Departure.

Existentialism. When they accuse themselves one can be sure that it is always to crush others. Judge-penitents.

With Luke true treason begins, causing the disappearance of Jesus' desperate cries. (NB/51: 131)

Camus is interested in origins, not solely with effects. I suggest the first part of this plan and the first four chapters of *La Chute* largely concern effects. There he draws a portrait of the bourgeois man. In the last two chapters of *La Chute*, Camus considers the 'beginning,' that is, the genesis of this modern man, as unless one returns to the beginning and refuses the first lie, there is only repetition.

At the end of *L'Homme révolté*, Camus writes that "in the light, the earth remains our first and our last love. Our brothers are breathing under the same sky as we; justice is a living thing" (306). As noted in chapter two of this paper, for Camus, in the first light creation and the body are seen and they are beautiful. They are good. It is our abstraction from our living reality, our unfaith, which causes all to become unnatural, sinful. The object lesson of *La Chute* is performative, that is, for the reader it is an undergoing. Without the recognition of this original sundering, if the first lie is not refused, there is no way back – or, in light of Camus's concern with the possibility of a renaissance of Western culture, no way forward.

Indeed, chapter five of *La Chute*, which concerns the latter part of the fourth day, opens with Clamence and the interlocutor at sea making their way back to the mainland.

Clamence says,

[y]ou are wrong, *cher*, the boat is going at top speed. But the Zuider Zee is a dead sea, or almost. With its flat shores, lost in the fog, there's no saying where it begins or ends. So we are steaming along without any landmark; we can't gauge our speed. We

are making progress and yet nothing is changing. It's not navigation but dreaming.  
(96)

I suggest that Camus alludes here to the bourgeois notion of progress addressed in the fourth chapter of this paper. Again, Modernity's rebellion opened with a promise of a future terrestrial kingdom which, at least in the West, was undergirded by the concept of progress. Having overturned the reign of grace, the reign of justice with which it was to be supplanted was to lead progressively toward this promised land. However, while 'there may be progress, nothing is changing.' Rather, Western civilization is at present a degraded repetition of the Christian myth against which Modernity revolted, as is addressed in last two chapters of *La Chute*. Yet again, then, this is a story about a story.

*On returning*

While making their way back, Clamence tells the interlocutor that his efforts to 'upset the game' failed. As he could not persuade the 'society of men' that their notion of him as a basically 'admirable' figure was not accurate, he left their society for that of women. He notes that "at that time I felt the need of love. Obscene, isn't it? ... Inasmuch as I needed to love and be loved, I thought I was in love" (99). Prior to this period, Clamence refused to make commitments and those he now made, none of which he could keep, were thus merely a further 'deviation from virtue.' Eventually he decides on chastity, but as he says, "without desire, women bored me beyond all expectation, and obviously I bored them too. No more gambling and no more theatre – I was probably in the realm of truth. But truth, *cher ami*, is a colossal bore" (101).

Clamence then turned to debauchery which, he says, conferred a sense of immortality as 'for hours on end one soars in bliss.' Moreover, by the end of each



adventure, with desire drained, “hope ceases to be a torture...; the mind dominates the whole past, and the pain of living is over forever” (102). Indeed, he claims that “[i]n a sense, I had always lived in debauchery, never having ceased wanting to be immortal... I was too much in love with myself not to want the precious object of my love never to disappear” (102). He adds that this was the key to his nature, a comment which may well be an allusion to the ‘Christian man.’

Having found ‘solace in women and drink,’ he likely would have continued in this way had his liver not become a problem. At that point, with his vitality drained, he was forced to give up his ‘nocturnal excesses.’ During and after the ‘months of orgy,’ however, the ‘laughter was stifled’. His emotions flattened, with ‘nothing remaining but to grow older,’ he felt he had found ‘the cure’ at last. To ‘celebrate it,’ he invited a woman to join him on a trip aboard an ocean liner. From the upper deck one day, he spotted a black speck far off in the ocean. He ‘turned away and felt his heart beat faster,’ but it had disappeared by the time he had ‘forced’ himself to look back. He considered calling for help, though when it reappeared he realized it was merely debris left in the wake of the ship. He says that “I had not been able to endure watching it; for I had thought at once of a drowning person” (108). He claims that

[t]hen I realized... that the cry which had sounded over the Seine behind me years before had never ceased, ... that it had waited for me there until the day I had encountered it. I realized likewise that it would continue to await me on seas and rivers, everywhere, in short, where lies the bitter waters of my baptism. (108)

And he adds, “[h]ere, too, by the way, aren’t we on water? ... We shall never get out of this immense holy-water fount” (108-9).

With the realization that he will forever hear this call which he did not answer, Clamence says “I had to submit and admit my guilt. I had to live in the little-ease” (109). The little-ease, he explains, was a medieval dungeon cell in which a person could neither fully stand nor lie. He states that through the constricted and stiffened body, “the condemned man learned that he was guilty and that innocence consists in stretching joyously” (109-110). In light of Clamence’s response, the reader learns that the interlocutor suggests one could be innocent yet imprisoned, but Clamence will have none of this. He asserts that being innocent would then be ‘reduced to living hunchbacked,’ which he refuses to countenance, and that his ‘reasoning would collapse.’ Instead, he claims that “we cannot assert the innocence of anyone, whereas we can state with certainty the guilt of all. Every man testifies to the crime of all the others – that is my faith and my hope” (110). Clamence had found his salvation, or at least was on the way to it once he had come to this conclusion. Taking on the profession of judge-penitent completed it, at least provisionally.

Of religion, Clamence asserts that “God is not needed to create guilt or punishment. Our fellow men suffice, aided by ourselves” (110). He says that he will “wait for [the Last Judgment] resolutely, for I have known worse, the judgment of men. For them, no extenuating circumstances; even the good intention is ascribed to crime” (110). He also claims that

God’s sole usefulness would be to guarantee innocence, and I am inclined to see religion rather as a huge laundering venture – as it was once but briefly, for exactly three years, and it wasn’t called religion. Since then, soap has been lacking, our faces are dirty, and we wipe one another’s noses. All dunces, all punished, let’s all spit on one another and – hurry! to the little-ease! Each tries to spit first, that’s all. I’ll tell you

a big secret, *mon cher*. Don't wait for the Last Judgment. It takes place every day.  
(111)

With this oblique reference to Jesus' ministry and to what he sees as its immediate aftermath – the reign of guilt, Clamence enters into a discussion about the crucifixion.

He asks the interlocutor why he thought Jesus was crucified, adding that there were many reasons, but

beside the reasons that have been very well explained to us for the past two thousand years, there was a major one for that terrible agony, and I don't know why it has been so carefully hidden. The real reason is that *he* knew he was not altogether innocent. If he did not bear the weight of the crime he was accused of, he had committed others. (112)

Clamence refers to the 'Slaughter of the Innocents' during which Jesus was carried to safety as the children of Judea were slaughtered in his stead. He refers to this as Jesus' 'innocent crime,' which he says Jesus had to face day and night as "[g]iven the man he was, I am sure he could not forget them" (112). And of Jesus' cry on the cross, Clamence states that "it was the third evangelist, I believe, who first suppressed his complaint.... Thus the censor shouts aloud what he proscribes. The world's order is thus ambiguous" (113).

It is at this point in *La Chute* that Camus directly invokes the second line of departure he notes in the December 14 entry – that of the treason which begins with Luke in his excision of Jesus' 'seditious cry,' "why have you abandoned me?" In light of this, I suggest that Camus's conception of Jesus as a rebel, which he develops in both his thesis on Augustine and throughout *L'Homme révolté*, is also present in *La Chute*. Again, according to Camus, Jesus' 'complaint' is that of the rebel's cry of 'outraged innocence' in the face of the universal death sentence. The ambiguity of the world order to which

Clamence refers, and which Camus asserts throughout his works, is thereby upheld by Jesus' cry which 'the censor shouts aloud in proscribing it' (113). With his cry, Jesus upheld the limited condition of the creature which consists in our innocence and guilt. As Camus states in *L'Homme révolté*, "man is not entirely to blame; it was not he who started history; nor is he entirely innocent, since he continues it" (297). Otherwise said, while we are responsible for history, our common nature is the ground of our innocence. However, just as Luke, first of all, was unable to live with this ambiguity, so too Clamence.

In *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, John Cruickshank argues that at issue in *La Chute* is precisely this pervasive ambiguity which marks the modern world. He notes that while Saint Paul came to a similar conclusion 1900 years ago, the solution he provides is no longer largely held in Modernity. Innocence is thereby more difficult to accept. And of Clamence's view of human nature, he asserts that "[a]ll men seem compromised and guilty in some measure. This might well seem to bring the wheel back full circle to Christianity, but Clamence appears to avoid this possible conclusion by asserting that even Christ was not without guilt" (Cruickshank 186-7). For Camus, 'the fall' refers to human fallibility, though it is not original sin which is at stake, but rather "human guilt rendered all the more acute because there is no available standard of innocence" (Cruickshank 187). As Clamence says toward the end of the fourth day, "the keenest of human torments is to be judged without a law.... [W]e are in that torment" (117). Cruickshank claims, then, that "whereas unequivocal innocence was the source of alienation in *L'Étranger* and of obstinate revolt in *La Peste*..., *La Chute* is a more

profoundly pessimistic novel” (183). In short, Cruickshank claims that the Christian doctrines of the redemption and original sin, which ‘go hand in hand,’ are ‘explicitly rejected’ in *La Chute* (187) and that the text evidences Camus’s loss of confidence in the innocence of man.

While I agree that Camus rejects the two Christian doctrines, both in *La Chute* and elsewhere, of interest is the relationship Camus sees between the doctrine of original sin and Modernity which he considers in the last two chapters of *La Chute*. As to whether Camus still accepted the possibility of innocence at the time of writing *La Chute*, I suggest that the references to the crucifixion of Christ and Clamence’s crime, the abandonment of the body in the Seine, need to be read together in light of *L’Homme révolté*. I will address these issues after a brief consideration of the fifth and last day.

*On the last day*

Clamence tells the interlocutor one final story about his past life on their last day together. I relate it here because it neatly highlights the turn he has taken from stories which concern his history to the genesis story of modern Western culture. The interlocutor meets with Clamence in his home this time, as the latter has ‘a little fever,’ the aftermath, he says, of having caught Malaria in North Africa during the war ‘at the time he was pope’ in a German prison camp. Clamence tells the interlocutor that in this prison camp there was a Frenchman with faith who, while fighting with the Republicans in Spain, was interned by ‘the Catholic general.’ As in “the Franco camps even the chick-peas were... blessed by Rome, he developed a profound melancholy” (124). In the German camp in North Africa, disturbed by sun, thirst and fatigue, this man “declared...

the need for a new pope who should live among the wretched instead of praying on a throne, and the sooner, the better” (124-5). He proposed that they immediately choose from amongst themselves “a complete man with his vices and virtues and swear allegiance to him, on the sole condition that he should agree to keep alive, in himself and in others, the community of our sufferings” (125). Clamence, the only one to raise his hand, was elected and he “exercised... [his] new pontificate, for several weeks, with increasing seriousness” (125). He tried to minister equitably and largely did until he drank the water of a dying comrade. The Frenchman had by this point already died, but Clamence says he believes he would ‘have resisted longer, for he loved this man.’ As it was, he claims that “[I convinced] myself that the others needed me more than this fellow who was going to die anyway and that I had a duty to keep myself alive for them. Thus, *cher*, empires and churches are born under the sun of death” (127). This story signals that Clamence’s ‘confession’ encompasses historical Christianity, as well. Thus he, and Camus, return to the beginning of Modernity.

After relating this story, Clamence says to the interlocutor that “I know what you’re thinking: it’s very hard to disentangle the true from the false in what I’m saying.... Don’t lies eventually lead to the truth? And don’t all my stories, true or false, tend toward the same conclusions?” (118) They are, he says, “significant of what I have been and of what I am” (118). Thus he finally tells the interlocutor the what, how and why of the profession of judge-penitent, which ultimately renders truth and falsehood irrelevant as above all, it is a question of power.

In light of his guilt, Clamence is unable to live with the uncertainty of his innocence which, as noted earlier, he says ‘we feel as if from our very nature.’ Allowing that the Christian order had been overturned and thus a ‘standard of innocence’ is no longer largely available in Modernity, he is powerless to stop his fall. In recognizing his guilt for having abandoned the woman, he surreptitiously and simultaneously refuses it. As he cannot stand above or outside of this particular act of moral cowardice and as he does not know how to bear the weight of it alone, he perpetrates a second betrayal – he calumniates against human nature. His duplicity is the duplicity of all. Given the self-condemnation which he cannot escape, Clamence concludes that “it is essential to begin by extending [it] to all, without distinction, in order to thin it out at the start” (131). And his method, he says, “consists, to begin with, in indulging in public confession as often as possible. I accuse myself up and down. It’s not hard, for I now have acquired a memory” (139). Echoes of Augustine’s *Confessions*, distorted or not, are unmistakable here.

Clamence establishes himself as the ‘lowest of the low’ through his public confessions, which as an accomplished rhetorician he adapts to his listener, ‘choosing features, experiences and failures which they share.’ Just as this ‘portrait of all and none’ is completed, he ‘imperceptibly passes from the ‘I’ to the ‘we,’ concluding with, ‘this is what we are.’ The portrait which he then ‘holds up to his contemporaries becomes a mirror’ and with this ‘the trick has been played,’ the tables turned. At this point, Clamence regains his superiority as he is the first to recognize our common condition and thus has ‘the right to speak.’ He realized that if he were to moralize and judge first, he would be next in line. This way he ‘dominates at last, but forever.’ When after long

intervals the laughter resounds, he says he “quickly crushes everything, people and things, under the weight of [... his] own infirmity” (142). He tells the interlocutor that “[t]he more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you. Even better, I provoke you into judging yourself, and this relieves me of that much of the burden” (140). As Clamence notes, if we consider our lives, we all have ‘occasions to amaze and horrify ourselves.’ With the seeds of self-doubt sown in his interlocutor, the latter is thereby ‘invited to begin the process of self-scrutiny and self-interpretation.’ Otherwise said, through his confession Clamence attempts to induce in his interlocutors the movement of interiority in order to inculcate them in guilt.

Regarding his self-examination, he says to the interlocutor that “on the bridges of Paris I, too, learned that I was afraid of freedom. So hurrah for the master, whoever he may be, to take the place of heaven’s law” (136). He asserts that “the essential thing is to cease being free and to obey, in repentance, a greater rogue than oneself. When we are all guilty, that will be democracy” (136). He thus concludes that he is “an enlightened advocate of slavery. Without slavery... there is no definitive solution” (132). This, he says, is also our way of taking “revenge for having to die alone. Death is solitary, whereas slavery is collective” (136). In the latter case, ‘the other gets theirs at the same time as we.’ And at a point he adds that “[e]veryone will be saved, eh? – and not only the elect” (145), a direct allusion to Augustine’s distinction between the saved and the damned which lies at the heart of the latter’s understanding of salvation.

Toward the end of the revelation of his method, Clamence speaks of the fall as occurring at dawn when the “rosy light announces a new day of... [his] creation” (144).



He tells the stranger that he will await him in *Mexico City Bar*, stating that “[t]hen please tell me what happened to you one night on the quays of the Seine and how you managed never to risk your life” (147). Clamence is quite certain that at some point the interlocutor will succumb to this invitation. He also tells him that “[y]ou will see me teaching them night after night that they are vile. This very evening, moreover, I shall resume. I can’t do without it or deny myself those moments when one of them collapses, with the help of alcohol, and beats his breast” (142-43).

Powerless to stop his fall, Clamence has become a slave to power – he needs always to repeat his confession in order to inculcate others in guilt and thereby dominate them. And he will always need to dominate others in order that his ‘salvation’ work as it requires that servitude be universal. Hence his last address to the interlocutor, *cher maître*. Having sown the seeds of doubt in this listener, he too will need to find a solution to his new disquiet. And Clamence believes it will be much like his own – that of the master enslaved by power and guilt. Clamence’s confession, then, solely leads to the world of master and slave. In *L’Homme révolté*, Camus asserts that ‘between master and slave no communication is possible’ (283). A monologue disguised as a dialogue perfectly reflects just such a world. Form and content are seamless.

According to Camus, it is freedom that the ‘modern progressives,’ such as Sartre and company, cannot bear. Indeed, in *Camus and Sartre*, Ronald Aronson argues “that Clamence begins as the Camus of Sartre and Jeanson, then takes on features of Camus’s own subjectivity, and is finally transmuted into Sartre himself!” (Aronson 197) In a late 1950 or early 1951 notebook entry, Camus writes that “[t]he revolutionary mind rejects

original sin. By so doing, it sinks into it. The Greek mind does not think about it. By so doing, it escapes from it” (NB/42: 174). As discussed in chapter four of this paper, while the Modern revolutionaries succeed in overturning the old master, the parameters of the first attempt at a definitive revolution remained unchanged. Thus, while the Christian doctrines of original sin and redemption are refused, the absolutist parameters of the Christian myth stand. So too, then, does thinking in terms of ‘all or nothing.’ However, in Modernity, ‘alone in the prisoner dock’ with no ‘standard of innocence’ against which we can measure our crimes, we stand before our own judgment and/or that of others. Without a limit, guilt becomes absolute.

Thus, while Cruickshank is right in saying that Camus rejects both Christian doctrines, Camus does see a direct line of descent from the doctrine of original sin to that of the tyranny of guilt which he perceived amongst leftist intellectuals. Clamence claims that

[h]e who clings to a law does not fear the judgment that reinstates him in an order he believes in. But the keenest of human torments is to be judged without a law. Yet we are in that torment. Deprived of their natural curb, the judges, loosed at random are racing through their job. Hence we have to try to go faster than they, don’t we? And it’s a real madhouse. Prophets and quacks multiply; they hasten to get there with a good law or a flawless organization before the world is deserted. (117-118)

Within the Christian myth, the order to which man belonged was that of God’s. The Last Judgment, the final court of appeal, mitigated the effects of the ‘original sin’ in this world and redeemed it in the next. Modernity has lost this limit, however, and thus the ‘judges are loosed.’ The references to a ‘good law’ and a ‘flawless organization’ are, of course, a nod from Camus toward bourgeois and Communist efforts to instate the reign of justice

after having overturned the reign of grace, that is, through the adherence to formal moralism and the deification of history, respectively. But as Clamence says,

[w]hether they are atheists or churchgoers, Muscovites or Bostonians, all Christians from father to son. But it so happens that there is no more father, no more rule! They are free and hence have to shift for themselves; and since they don't want freedom or its judgments, they ask to be rapped on the knuckles, they rush out to build piles of faggots to replace churches.... But they believe solely in sin, never in grace. (134-35)

He adds, “[f]ortunately, I arrived! I am the end and the beginning; I announce the law. In short, I am a judge-penitent” (118).

By the end of Modernity, the dream of a reign of justice has become a reign of guilt without remission. In a notebook entry of late summer or early fall of 1947, Camus writes, “[m]isery of this century. Not so long ago it was bad actions that asked to be justified. Today it is the good ones” (NB/42: 108). In brief, the age of Enlightenment and the faith which sustained the 18<sup>th</sup> century revolutionaries is followed by the ‘the age of suspicion’<sup>85</sup> which is marked by radical mistrust.

Again, Cruickshank asserts that at issue in *La Chute* is the pervasive ambiguity which marks the modern world. I suggest that the war years and its aftershock, in which we still live, led Camus to a deeper concern. What attends this ambiguity is an insidious and visceral sense of distrust, which is, like the ambiguity of the world, a mark of the absurd as noted in chapter one of this paper. In a notebook entry of June 25, 1947, Camus claims that

[m]istrust of formal virtue – this is the explanation for this world. Those who have felt this mistrust of themselves and extended it to other people have become permanently

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<sup>85</sup> The ‘age of suspicion’ is a term coined mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by the French writer, Nathalie Sarraute, as Cruickshank notes in *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, 186.

suspicious of any openly declared virtue. And this is only one step away from mistrusting virtue *when it is practiced*. (NB/42: 104)

As Clamence's confession evidences, at stake in *La Chute* is precisely this mistrust of self and other which marks our age. Through his self-examination, Clamence loses the implicit faith he had in himself and the good that he did do is retrospectively understood as a covert will to power. His crime, the abandonment of the body on the bridge, is for him without measure as he is unable to accept the ambiguity of the 'double life' of man. Seeking certainty, just as Augustine did sixteen hundred years earlier, he rejects the double life of man which he too henceforth determines in terms of the fundamental duplicity of man. As will be discussed below, this need for certainty and the notion of the duplicity of man are clear echoes of Augustine's *Confessions*, of which, I believe, Clamence's is but an imitation. Given this possibility, Clamence's claim to be 'the end and the beginning' takes on a new nuance.

#### *Book of genesis*

Again, *La Chute* is generally interpreted as being as a portrait of the modern Western bourgeois. Decidedly it is that. However, it appears that the genesis story Clamence, and implicitly Camus, simultaneously relates in the last two chapters of the novel is largely ignored by commentators. It is eclipsed by Clamence's public confession which is identified, at least in part, as the personal confession of Camus. It is possible that reading Clamence's confession in abstraction from the genesis myth, which I suggest encompasses it, has contributed to, if not created, the impression that this novel is, for Camus, uncharacteristically 'dark' and 'pessimistic.' In short, on this reading it does indeed appear to be an 'un-Camusian' text as Fitch asserts.

In an interview, Camus was asked if he felt the same discouragement as that expressed by the character Clamence. In response, Camus claims that “[m]y hero is indeed discouraged, and this is why, as a good modern nihilist, he exalts servitude. Have I chosen to exalt servitude?” (LCE 364) Interpreting this novel as confessional in a personal sense presupposes that Clamence’s discouragement is, at least in part, Camus’s. At best, this reading presupposes that Camus cannot see a way through it. At worst, and in light of Camus’s comment about Clamence, that he has come to exalt servitude. If indeed there is no light at the end of the tunnel into which Clamence, and Camus on this interpretation, leads the reader, then yes, it is an uncharacteristically dark and pessimistic novel for Camus.

It is true that he had felt betrayed by Sartre and that he had been deeply depressed by the reception of *L’Homme révolté* and the polemics which followed. In fact, there is at times an uncharacteristic note of bitterness in his notebooks during this period. It is equally true that the cynical tone of *La Chute* is ‘uncharacteristic’ of Camus. Yet, as quoted in chapter two of this paper, Camus claims that “from *Noces* through to... *The Rebel*, my whole effort has been in fact to depersonalize myself (each time in a different tone). Afterwards, I shall be able to speak in my own name” (NB/42: 137). The question is whether Camus is speaking in his own name in this text, then.

Considering *La Chute* as a confession on the part of Camus clearly presupposes that he is. Again, the assumption of most commentators is that following the Sarte/Jeanson debacle, Camus finally recognizes that he is not an ‘altogether admirable fellow’. Thereby having become aware of his own ‘fallibility,’ he exorcizes his demons

through this text while simultaneously setting himself upright again in relation to Sartre and company. To consider this latter aspect in isolation from the wider political critique carried out in *La Chute* turns Camus into solely a man of resentment. And I suggest that limiting the novel to a critique of Modernity and of Camus's contemporary political situation is a foreshortening of its vision. The genesis myth in *La Chute* renders the novel not only a critique of Modernity, but also of Western civilization which, according to Camus, begins with Augustine's metaphysics of the Incarnation and the journey of the soul toward God. Prior to considering this aspect of the novel, it is necessary to assess the assumption that Camus needed to exorcise his demons through this text.

As to the echoes of Camus's own character and life, most of these aspects were at that time general public knowledge. Had Camus created a character as dark as that of Clamence without the personal resonances, I do not believe the novel would have carried the weight it did for Camus's contemporaries. As to whether Camus had discovered during this period that he was 'not altogether admirable,' I cannot say. But in light of a comment in his notebook on the much earlier date of June 25, 1947, in which Camus states that "I know myself too well to believe in totally pure virtue," I can assert with some certainty that it appears he held at most only the slightest illusions as to his 'admirable character' before this period. Recall as well O'Brien's claim that 'the Algerian conflict weighed heavy on his conscience' given Camus's 'bad faith' in relation to this issue. Yet as noted above, in the 1958 preface to his writings on Algeria, Camus maintains and defends his federalist stance. On O'Brien's reading, then, it can only be said that Camus appears to remain 'unrepentant.' Finally, and again, to read this text as a

personal confession discounts Camus's stated distaste for public confessions, both in this novel and elsewhere. In short, I do not consider the confession in *La Chute* as personal at all. Rather, just as in *L'Étranger*, the structure and form of this novel drive it deeper than the content.

*The first and last confession – The end and the beginning*

Recall here Camus's understanding of literature, which in his view "consists of the exact adjustment of form to subject matter, of language to theme" (LCE 348). As with his other novels, to see what he is doing with *La Chute* requires that we consider the relationship between the form of the novel, the confessional style, and its content, both the genesis myth and the portrait of the modern bourgeois, as well as its structure. While some of these elements were briefly alluded to during the analysis of the novel, in way of a summary it is helpful to bring them together here. I will begin with Augustine's *Confessions*, of which I believe *La Chute* is an imitation.

Just as the last two chapters of *La Chute* relate a genesis myth after having drawn the portrait of modern man, so the last three books of Augustine's *Confessions* concern the biblical *Book of Genesis*. Book XI provides an explanation of the first verse of Genesis; book XII consists in an exegesis of Genesis 1: 1, 2; and in book XIII, Augustine undertakes an allegorical reading of the first chapter of Genesis which concerns the creation of the world. The presence of these chapters has long perplexed commentators. They appear almost as an addendum – but to what? According to Hadot, a genesis myth serves to return the generations "to the memory of their origin and their ancestors, in order to root them in the universal order and the foundational act of the creator-deity"

(10-11). It is possible, then, that Augustine is situating the image and task of man which he outlines in the first ten books through his personal confession in relation to their proper order – that of the ‘creator-deity.’

In book X, chapter 27 of the *Confessions*, which, as discussed in chapter two of this paper, can be read as Augustine’s invocation of God as lover, he finally arrives at the recognition of his end. In chapter 28 he considers whether he will find his way back to God who has never left him. And he largely concludes here that “man’s life on earth [is] a long, unbroken period of trial” (232). In chapters 29 through 39, he enters into a lengthy disquisition on the three types of temptation to which he, as all men, are subject. The first concerns our bodily desires, from the ‘fire of sensuality’ to ‘eating and drinking more for the sake of pleasure rather than for the sake of health.’ He also considers the gratification of the senses, those of smell, sound and sight, and the pleasure we experience in the objects we make. He states that while he recognizes the beauty in and of the world to be solely a reflection of the true Beauty that is God, his “feet are still caught in the toils of this world’s beauty” (241). In chapter 35 he speaks of the second temptation as being that of the mind, of our ‘futile curiosity’ and our thirst for knowledge, such as knowledge of the ‘secrets of nature, which are irrelevant to our lives and of no value to us, and which are sought merely for the sake of knowing’ (241-42). In chapter 36 he arrives at the third and last temptation, that of pride and the desire for the approbation of others, this being the one he ‘fears has not passed from him.’ It is, he says, “the desire to be feared or loved by other men, simply for the pleasure it gives me, though in such pleasure there is no true joy” (244). He asserts that it is in this that ‘the



enemy' attacks him by setting traps, "baiting them with tributes of applause.... He wants me to divorce my joy from the truth and place it in man's duplicity. He wants me to enjoy being loved and feared by others, not for your sake, but in your place" (244-45). He also notes the temptations of self-reproach and self-complacency, both of which arise out of vanity or pride as well.

In chapters 40 through 42, Augustine recapitulates his self-examination, praising God for having given him counsel in this. Coming to the end of examining his faults and temptations, he asks finally, "whom could I find to reconcile me to you?" (250) In chapter 43, which immediately precedes the last three books in which he turns his attention to the biblical *Book of Genesis*, he speaks of the 'true Mediator' "who appeared on earth between men, who are sinful and mortal, and God, who is immortal and just" (250-51) in order to bring about this reconciliation.

Augustine was an accomplished rhetorician and as such would have adapted his story to his listeners, 'choosing features, experiences and failures which they share.' Indeed the three types of 'temptations' which he discusses are those of us all. Like the portrait of the bourgeois man in *La Chute*, so the portrait of man in the *Confessions* is equally that of 'all and none.' At the end of this examination of man, it seems natural that Augustine would then consider the order to which this man is fundamentally related. And the structure of the text literally reflects the relation of the Christian man to this order. In the Christian myth, the creator-deity is above or separate from his creation. Thus, in the first ten books Augustine speaks of his past and present in light of his search for God, ending with the chapter on the 'true Mediator' who reconciles us with the creator-deity.

In the last three, he speaks of the creator and the creation. In book XIII, an allegorical reading of the *Book of Genesis*, he recounts man's pilgrimage toward or away from God. For example, "the 'sea' means the human race, embittered by estrangement from God, and the 'dry land' which stands out from the sea represents the good soul" (8). This divide of the creator and creation, which I suggest is structurally reflected in *Confessions*, is in turn mediated through the incarnation of God himself, the mystery of which Augustine subsequently considers in *City of God against the Pagans*. The genesis myth attached to his confession can be read, then, as a reminder to the generations of the creation before the fall, which is their rightful place, and of the creator-deity who calls them to himself. Thus the allegorical reading of *Genesis* tells of the way of return.

I believe the genesis myth Clamence relates toward the end of *La Chute* is 'a reminder to his generation' of that which precedes and shapes Modernity – the Christian myth of the fall of man. By the end of Clamence's self-examination, he determines that his practice of virtue prior to his 'fall' was solely a function of his desire for the approbation of others. He also stands accused of self-complacency before his fall, then, and clearly of self-reproach after. And again like Augustine, his self-examination leads him to conclude that man is fundamentally duplicitous. Unlike Augustine, however, Clamence gives free reign to his 'duplicity.' Just as we are suffering the aftershock of the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so Camus holds that we are still suffering the aftershock of the Christian myth and its imperfect deconstruction.

The doctrines of the original sin and the redemption grounded Western civilization for 2000 years. In the Christian story, the limit of man's guilt was Christ's

innocence. Whereas this standard of innocence has largely been lost to Modernity, the effects of the doctrine of original sin still reverberate. Recall here the assertion that Clamence makes as he and the interlocutor make their way back to dry land. He says that “[w]e shall never get out of this immense holy-water fount” (109). Though Augustine appears not to have trusted himself or humankind, he did trust God. Thus, within the Augustinian frame there is a place to rest. For Augustine, then, we are ‘fallen.’ In Modernity, nothing remains to arrest our fall. On Camus’s view, only falling remains – endless guilt and the distrust of innocence. Otherwise said, there remains only the radical mistrust of self and other.

Aronson aptly asserts that “Clamence seeks to trap and torment others. He is the contemporary incarnation of the devil” (208). Again, in *L’Homme révolté* Camus asserts that Modernity’s rebellion is the ‘history of European pride.’ And within the Christian myth, pride is understood precisely as the rebellion of man against God’s will. Modernity opens in outraged innocence against a god perceived as absolutely unjust and reaches an end wherein all are considered guilty until the idyll arrives. Like the Modern revolutionaries, Clamence, that is, the modern bourgeois, has lost his ‘quiet faith in man’ which Camus holds is precisely what the first rebel, Prometheus, preserves amid “the thunder and lightning of the gods” (LCE 142). In contrast, and as noted in chapter four of this paper, Camus refers to the revolutionaries of Modernity as the ‘sons of Cain.’ This brings us to the references Clamence makes to the man Jesus and to his innocence especially in light of what he understands as Jesus’ guilt, which, being human, is like that of all men.

Clarence says at a point that Jesus “cried aloud his agony and that’s why I love him, my friend who died without knowing” (114). In fact, he says Jesus is his only friend. Recall that Clarence refers to the rest of the members of the human race as ‘accomplices’ rather than as friends. He also says of Jesus that he ‘only wanted to be loved’ and that “he spoke softly to the adulteress: ‘Neither do I condemn thee!’” (115). But Jesus, he notes, has been ‘hoisted onto the seat of the judge’ and judgment is made in his name by those who ‘condemn without absolving anyone.’ As always, however, Camus distinguishes between historical Christianity and Christians. Thus, Clarence adds that “[o]f course, there are those who love him, even among Christians. But they are not numerous” (115).

In spite of having asserted that Jesus is guilty, Clarence paradoxically refers to the innocence of Jesus three times. Orthodox theology asserts the absolute innocence of Jesus the God-man, who, through his life and death cancels the original sin of the first man and thus is the promise of our redemption. Clarence has rejected this solution, however, as has Modernity. Rather, on Clarence’s view, and Camus’s, it is innocence itself that was killed with the crucifixion of Jesus, though what he means by innocence is clearly not that of the orthodox view. I will first quote the three references to Jesus’ innocence as they need to be understood in concert.

Of the death of Jesus, Clarence says that “[p]eople naturally tried to get some help from his death. After all, it was a stroke of genius to tell us ‘You’re not a very pretty sight, that’s certain. Well, we won’t go into the details! We’ll just liquidate it all at once, on the cross!’” (114). Somewhat later he states that “no one is ever acquitted any more.

On dead innocence the judges swarm, the judges of all species, those of Christ and those of the Antichrist, who are the same anyway, reconciled in the little-ease” (116). Finally, on the fifth day Clamence states his reasons for keeping the object he holds in trust for the proprietor of *Mexico City*. It is the stolen panel of Van Eyck’s altarpiece, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, entitled “The Just Judges.”<sup>86</sup> In the painting, the ‘just judges’ are on their way to see the ‘lamb’ of the title, the only image of Christ in the altarpiece. The last two reasons Clamence cites for keeping it in his room are germane here. He says he stores it

because those judges are on their way to meet the Lamb, because there is no more lamb or innocence, and because the clever rascal who stole the panel was an instrument of the unknown justice that one ought not to thwart. Finally, because this way everything is in harmony. Justice being definitively separated from innocence – the latter on the cross and the former in the cupboard – I have the way clear to work according to my convictions. With a clear conscience I can practice the difficult profession of judge-penitent, in which I have set myself up after so many blighted hopes and contradictions. (130)

Innocence was liquidated on the cross, but it was not the absolute innocence of the man Jesus, as he himself was guilty according to Clamence. Note also the distinction of ‘the lamb’ and ‘innocence.’ I believe that the former reference is a nod to the Christian understanding of Jesus, the latter to Camus’s. As to the former, the divinity of Christ was denied by the 19<sup>th</sup> century theologians. On Camus’s view, it was man’s innocence which was denied by the doctrine of original sin. What was crucified two thousand years ago, then, was the innocence of the first man, that is, of our common nature.

In a note for his posthumously published novel *Le premier homme*, Camus writes that “[e]very man is the first man, nobody is” (NB/51: 125). We all share in the

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<sup>86</sup> Stolen in 1934 from Ghent Cathedral, this panel has yet to be recovered.

innocence of the first man, just as we have all committed acts for which we are guilty, or better, responsible. Thus, we are all the first man and none of us is. We are double, in the benign sense with which Camus uses this term in *L'Homme révolté*. The terms innocence and guilt are meaningful only in their relationship. Disruption of this unity, which the doctrine of original sin introduces, renders what is relative absolute. At that point, as Clamence says, justice and innocence are 'definitively separated' and 'the judges of all species, those of Christ and those of the Antichrist, who are the same anyway, [are] reconciled in the little-ease,' that is, in guilt without remission. Recall that Clamence claims this reign of guilt as the immediate aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion, the key difference being that in Modernity the doctrine of redemption has been denied.

I rather imagine that Clamence hears in Jesus' cry of abandonment echoes of those of the woman whom he abandoned years before in the water. Indeed, I suggest Camus intends this echo in order to indicate a similarity between these instances of abandonment. Just as Camus understands Modernity as a repetition of the Christian myth, so Clamence's crime is the repetition of Luke's treason first of all, that is, of the refusal of the ambiguity of existence. And Clamence's crime of the abandonment of the body and the consequent retreat to consciousness repeats Augustine's movement of interiority, yet another instance of the abandonment of the body as discussed in chapter two of this paper. Finally, it is possible that through 'death by water' Clamence intends an echo of the holy-water fount from which he says we will never escape. As such, perhaps the abandonment of the woman to the water is an allusion to the abandonment of the love of

the creature for the love of eternity, ‘at least by those who disguise love as an image of eternity.’

The Christian solution was predicated upon the loss of the body – that is, in its fight with nature, it disrupted the body/soul unity, a rupture exacerbated by Descartes’s introduction of the principle of subjectivity at the dawn of Modernity. In fact, Clamence says at a point, “one mustn’t blame everything exclusively on the Christians. The others are involved too. Do you know what has become of one of the houses in this city that sheltered Descartes? A lunatic asylum” (116). The vilification of the body, begun by Paul, was sealed by Augustine with the formulation of the doctrine of original sin. Thus, just as Clamence holds up to his contemporaries a mirror image of the modern bourgeois, so his confession is a mirror image of the first, that of Augustine’s. I suggest that this is the larger story that is told by Clamence in his very telling of it.

*The last man or the first?*

Clamence says to the interlocutor

my solution is not ideal. But when you don’t like your own life, when you know that you must change lives, you don’t have any choice do you? What can one do to become another? Impossible. One would have to cease being anyone, forget oneself for someone else, at least once. But how? Don’t bear down too hard on me. I’m like that old beggar who wouldn’t let go of my hand one day on a café terrace: “Oh sir,” he said, “it’s not just that I’m no good, but you lose track of the light.” Yes, we have lost track of the light, the mornings, the holy innocence of those who forgive themselves. (144-5)

Referring to this passage, King claims that Clamence is incapable of this act of self-forgetting. In light of this, she concludes that “*La Chute* does not suggest that such innocence can be recaptured” (93). Recall too the pessimism attributed to this novel by Fitch, Cruickshank and others. It is in relationship to such readings that the significance

of the open-endedness of the novel becomes clear. I do not think Camus is inviting readers to the process ‘self-scrutiny and self-interpretation’ as does Fitch. Rather, I believe that Camus is challenging the readers of *La Chute* to choose.

In a notebook entry of early 1942, headed with, ‘For a generous psychology,’ Camus writes,

We help a person more by giving him a favourable image of himself than by constantly confronting him with his faults. Everyone normally tries to be like the best image of himself. This can be extended to education, history, philosophy and politics. We, for example, are the result of twenty centuries of Christian imagery. For 2000 years man has been presented with a humiliated image of himself. We can see the result. Who, in any case, can say what we would have become if these twenty centuries had seen the continuation of the classical ideal with its admirable image of man. (NB/42: 4)

It is possible that *La Chute* is extending an invitation not to the movement of interiority, but to that of revolt – against such a humiliated image of man. Again, the movement of revolt is a movement of love insofar as it is the defence of the dignity of man and thus of both the oppressed and oppressor. And it is precisely in this movement that one ‘forgets oneself for someone else,’ as discussed by Camus in both his 1945 essay “Remarque sur la révolte” and in *L’Homme révolté*. While Clamence may well be incapable of it at this point, what of the addressee? What of our responsibility?

For Camus,

[i]f men cannot refer to a common value, recognized by all as existing in each one, then man is incomprehensible to man. The rebel demands that this value should be clearly recognized in himself because he knows or suspects that, without this principle, crime and disorder would reign throughout the world. An act of rebellion on his part seems like a demand for clarity and unity. (R 23)

Revolt is precisely the defence of the irreducible part of man and simultaneously the discovery of this value. He also asserts that



if man were capable of introducing unity into the world entirely on his own, if he could establish the reign, by his own decree, of sincerity, innocence, and justice, he would be God himself. Equally, if he could accomplish all this, there would be no more reasons for rebellion. If rebellion exists, it is because falsehood, injustice, and violence are part of the rebel's condition. He cannot, therefore, absolutely claim not to kill or lie, without renouncing his rebellion and accepting, once and for all, evil and murder. But no more can he agree to kill and lie, since the inverse reasoning which would justify murder and violence would also destroy the reasons for his insurrection. *Thus the rebel can never find peace. He knows what is good and, despite himself, does evil.* The value that supports him is never given to him once and for all; he must fight to uphold it, unceasingly. Again the existence he achieves collapses if rebellion does not support it. (285; italics are mine)

'Knowing the good yet doing evil,' an allusion to Paul's "Epistle to the Romans," is an echo from Camus's dissertation (Dis 100). There he cites an abbreviated version of Chapter VII, verses 15-23 of the epistle, followed by the assertion that "[t]his is where the 'to be unable not to sin' of Augustine is developed" (100).

For the purposes of this paper, I will quote from the *New Jerusalem Bible* (Standard Edition), which gives a fuller sense of this passage than does Camus's citation.<sup>87</sup> Paul writes,

I do not understand my own behaviour; I do not act as I mean to, but I do things that I hate. While I am acting as I do not want to, I still acknowledge the Law as good, so it is not myself acting, but the sin which lives in me. And really, I know of nothing good living in me – in my natural self, that is – for though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not: the good things I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not want – that is what I do. But every time I do what I do not want to, then it is not myself acting, but the sin that lives in me. So I find this rule: that for me, where I want to do nothing but good, evil is close at my side. In my inmost self I dearly love God's law, but I see that acting on my body there is a different law which

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<sup>87</sup> The passage as quoted in Camus's thesis is the following:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. (Rm 7:15-23; Dis 100)

The Bible which Camus used is not identified in the bibliography of his thesis.

battles against the law in my mind. So I am brought to be a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body. (Rm 7:15-23)

While Camus largely repeats this sentiment in *L'Homme révolté*, there are two profound differences. Paul distinguishes between the 'natural self,' that is, the man of flesh and blood or the 'carnal self,' and 'life in the Spirit.' The 'law in the mind,' God's will, is also made manifest in the Mosaic Law, which Paul is defending here. The Mosaic Law, as an expression of God's will, is good. But sin uses this Law because the carnal self "is enslaved to the 'principle' of sin, the body in which sin dwells and which sin possesses."<sup>88</sup> As such, "the problem is not with the law itself, but with the human condition... [T]he difficulty lies in the very makeup of human beings" (Anchor 473). In short, the "reasoning self willingly submits to God's law... in contrast to the carnal self" (Anchor 477). Paul begins with the Mosaic Law and through a deft elision, the 'law' of Moses becomes 'embodied reason' – it is reason, it is my inmost self. When I do what I do not want to do, 'it is not myself acting, but the sin that lives in me.' The law of sin living in my body is the offender, that is, 'I am brought to be a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body.' This broken experience of the body underlies the shift in sensibility which Augustine later enshrines in his doctrine of the original sin. As I noted in chapter two of this paper, if one is able to say, 'it's not me,' 'the body is to blame, not me,' 'I am not my body,' one can take a degree of distance from the passions. To abstract from 'one's body' is an abstraction from pain and suffering (and equally from joy), from

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<sup>88</sup> William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, gen. eds., *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), vol. 33: *Romans*, trans. and commentary by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., 477. Hereafter cited in the body of the paper as Anchor Bible.

a fundamental opacity. Paul's passage is an almost lyrical expression of this logic, that is, of this originary abstraction.

Of equal import here is Paul's conception of the 'human condition.' Recall that for Camus, the human condition consists in the tension between that which is irreducible in man and the situation against which he struggles (RR 22). Again, the human condition is a relative absolute. Paul, like Augustine after him, undertakes the movement of interiority, finding himself in relationship to the Absolute in the heart of consciousness or conscience. As such, the 'human condition' is considered in abstraction from the worldly situation in which he finds himself, at least in the first instance. Conversely, the rebel who wants to do the good but ends by doing evil takes into account the situation in which he finds himself – which itself is radically ambiguous. As opposed to the movement of interiority and the self-examination which marks Paul's epistle, the rebel is concerned with his relationship with the world rather than with the internal relation of the self – which Paul finds radically ambiguous. However, Paul does discover in this movement of interiority that it is through participation in God's order that the good is recognized and that it is only through the grace of God that good actions are possible at all. And as with the rebel, there is only an unceasing effort to approximate the good. The difference is that Paul finds the good in and through God; the rebel, conversely, finds it in the creature – that is, in the sacred flesh.

Rebellion requires that the rebel's *yes* to that which is to be preserved, the value of man, be maintained alongside his saying of *no* to that which oppresses him. And regardless of that which immediately oppresses the rebel, "in principle, [rebellion] is a

protest against death” (R 285). This tension is lost in nihilistic rebellion insofar as it ‘isolates the *no*.’ In light of this understanding of rebellion, Paul’s epistle can be interpreted as nihilistic. In his rebellion against sin, which on his view results in death, Paul isolates the ‘natural self,’ that is, the natural man in whom death is inscribed. Again, he perceives himself as ‘a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside his body’ in distinction from the ‘law in his mind.’ His rebellion against sin or death, then, entails an abstraction from the natural man and the identification with his ‘inmost self,’ whether it be named soul, mind or consciousness, or referred to as a ‘spiritual’ as opposed to a ‘natural’ body. His rebellion also implies a renunciation of ‘this world,’ in which Christians ‘no longer live’ (Col 2:22), in preference for the ‘next.’ Indeed, through the crucifixion of the physical or natural body of the historical Jesus (Anchor Bible 458), the Christian, understood in terms of the flesh, is also thereby crucified. As Paul writes in Galatians 5:24, “[a]ll who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified self with all its passions and its desires.” Now ‘dead to the world but alive in Christ,’ the Christian “lives under the new order of grace and the Spirit.... Like slaves emancipated and enslaved to a new master, ... Christians, risen in Christ, no longer live for themselves but for Christ and God” (NJB Rm 7:1, Note b).

In his revolt against death, that is, in saying *no* to death understood as sin, Paul equally says *no* to this life. Otherwise said, it is the refusal of the limited condition of the creature and of the ambiguity which marks this world. Only in an initial abstraction from the situation in which man finds himself can one begin to think of oneself in terms of the spirit and thus in terms of the absolute. However, this is in fact an abstraction from the

bodily existence of man in the first instance. And only in the confines of a ‘spiritual body’ or consciousness is it possible to think good and evil, innocence and guilt, in absolute terms. That his rebellion is nihilistic, that is, absolute, is also indicated by the means through which it is achieved – by absolute submission to God’s will. The relative condition of the creature is thereby eclipsed in this abstraction from the ‘natural body.’ This is perhaps the first and clearest statement of the divide of body/soul instated by the Christian myth in the West. Otherwise said, it is a clear statement of the identification of the person with ‘consciousness’ over and against ‘the body,’ or better, an identification of the self with mind or reason.

Perhaps the first to express the sentiment Paul does in his “Epistle to the Romans” is Euripides in his play *Medea* (1077b-80). Prior to killing her children in an act of revenge, Medea cries out, “I am being overcome by evil. I know that what I am about to do is evil, but passion is stronger than my reasoned reflection; and this is the cause of the worst evils for humans.”<sup>89</sup> While the Greeks too recognized the struggle between reason and the passions, mind/body was conceived in a hierarchical relationship such that reason was to rule the passions, which in themselves were not considered as ‘evil’ or as the source of evil. Rather, the cause of evil lies in the disordered relationship between the mind and passions. The relationship was conceived as a continuum, then, rather than in terms of either/or. For the Greeks, the whole man consists in light and darkness, reason and passion, body and mind. The passions are considered disruptive but not ‘sinful.’

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<sup>89</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, “The Focus of Romans: The Central Role of 5:1-8:39 in the Argument of the Letter,” in *Romans and the People of God*, eds. Sven K. Soderlund and N.T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 64.

Thus, one is more or less virtuous rather than moral or immoral. As Camus notes, “one sometimes manages to behave morally, but never to *be* moral” (LCE 14).

In a notebook entry on March 1, 1951, Camus writes that there is “[a] spectacular virtue which leads to a denial of our passions. A deeper virtue which leads to a balance between them” (NB/42: 177). It is precisely this notion of a balance between the mind and the passions that has been lost in the West with the disruption of the originary unity of mind/body, which, beginning with Paul, is sealed by Augustine’s doctrine of original sin, that is, with his notion of the ontological duplicity of man.

The allusion to Paul’s epistle in *L’Homme révolté* also resonates with Camus’s struggle with the problem of evil, with which he never ceased. However, unlike the Christians, and with the Greeks, Camus holds that in the natural man, that is, in our common nature, there lies a standard of innocence and a source of ‘living virtues’ which we experience in revolt. This concerns the recovery of the body, that is, of the whole man. And this recovery necessitates returning to the first lie – that I am not this ‘natural self.’ In a notebook entry of 1946 Camus writes,

The only great Christian thinker who has looked directly at the problem of evil is St. Augustine. And he drew from it the terrible ‘Nemo bonus’. Since then, Christianity has endeavoured to find provisional solutions to the problem.

The result is before our eyes. For it is the result. Men have taken some time over it, but today they are suffering from a poison they drank 2000 years ago. They are either worn out by evil or resigned to it, which amounts to the same thing. At least, they cannot stand any more lies on the subject. (NB/42: 92).

Worn out by evil or resigned to it, modern man has become ‘a solitary creature’ marked by a radical sense of distrust of self and other, which, I argue, is at issue in *La Chute*.

I believe the literary description of modern man earned Camus the charge of ‘pessimism’ solely because the novel is generally not read as a book of genesis. In light of this, it is interesting to note a response Camus gave to an earlier accusation of pessimism levelled against him by both Christians and Marxists, in which he alludes to the above notebook entry. In his 1948 statement made at the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Marbourg, Camus claims that

I was not the one to invent the misery of the human being or the terrifying formulas of divine malediction. I was not the one to shout *Nemo bonus* or the damnation of unbaptized children. I was not the one who said that man was incapable of saving himself by his own means and that in the depth of his degradation his only hope was in the grace of God. And as for the famous Marxist optimism! No one has carried distrust of man further, and ultimately the economic fatalities of this universe seem more terrible than divine whims. (RRD 72-3)

As opposed to being a ‘pessimistic novel,’ *La Chute* recapitulates Camus’s position on the relationship of Christianity to Modernity, as do the rest of his works. And as in these other texts, Camus challenges us to recognize and accept the limited condition of the creature – neither innocent nor guilty but both.

In a notebook entry written sometime between May and August of 1954, Camus aligns the possibility of ‘generalized death’ inherent in the use of a nuclear bomb with that of ‘the human condition on this point of view.’ In light of this coincidence, he asserts that

the universal curse no longer has God as author, but men. Men have finally become equals with God, but only in his cruelty. We must therefore begin again the revolt of ancient times, but this time against humanity. We demand a new Satan to deny the power of men. (NB/51: 101)

Clearly for Camus, Modernity is created not by the Christian myth but by Moderns. Thus Clamence, the portrait of the modern bourgeois, tells his interlocutor that he likes to walk

in the early dawn when “the rosy light announces a new day of my creation” (144), which takes him five days to complete. In the Christian genesis story, God makes man in his own image on the sixth day and rests on the seventh. Therefore, so too can man. However, having adopted the ‘humiliated image’ of man which devolved from this creation myth, for Moderns there is no rest. There is only falling. Clamence is this new Satan who defies the addressee to resist him or to become the last man of this, our creation. Indeed, according to Dante in the *Divina Commedia*, Satan resides in the ninth circle of Hell with the rest of the traitors, as does Clamence.<sup>90</sup>

While Moderns have created Modernity, it is not a new civilization but an abortive repetition of that instituted by the Christian revolution. In its nostalgia for the absolute, Modernity’s rebellion leads to the legitimation of murder. Conversely, genuine rebellion is “a force of life, not of death. Its most profound logic is not the logic of destruction; it is the logic of creation” (R 285). And its logic ‘proclaims the communication between men and a recognition of their common destiny’ (R 283), whereas “servitude, falsehood, and terror... are the causes of silence between men” (R 284). Thus, it is through rebellion that dialogue becomes a reality and thereby the possibility of a new creation arises.

*La Chute* is a decidedly odd novel, angry perhaps but not pessimistic. Of interest is how it fits into the corpus of Camus’s work as it does not, strictly speaking, belong to any of his cycles. It is not taken up in either the second or the projected third cycle, of which *Le premier homme* was to be the first work. Much like the solitary man it

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<sup>90</sup> Monique Crochet, *Les mythes dan l’oeuvre de Camus* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1973), 91.



describes, *La Chute* stands alone, which I imagine is by design. It appears to be a summation, of sorts, of Camus's engagement with his times. All the themes he had heretofore dealt with – lyricism, the absurd, responsibility, love, justice, judgment, Christianity and Modernity, freedom and slavery, innocence and guilt and so forth, are alluded to both directly and indirectly in this novel. It is in light of this as well that I do not believe Camus was as yet 'speaking in his own name.' I suggest that he begins to do so in *Le premier homme*, a genuinely autobiographical novel that remains incomplete.

Also in his 1948 statement, Camus asserts that "between the forces of terror and the forces of dialogue, a great unequal battle has begun. I have nothing but reasonable illusions as to the outcome of that battle" (73). I do not believe he gave up his revolt in *La Chute*. Rebellion is, in effect, a Sisyphean task. Its aim, to preserve the dignity of man, is never achieved once and for all. On Camus's view, the rebel rolls his stone unceasingly. Self-avowedly pagan in his sensibility, Camus is not a son of Cain but rather of Prometheus. And like Prometheus, I believe Camus maintained his quiet faith in man until the end. Indeed, the open-endedness of *La Chute* testifies to this. Once again, however, Camus leaves it up to the reader to decide – revolt or acquiescence? faith or unfaith? Otherwise said, *La Chute* is an invitation to 'take up the heartrending and marvellous wager of the absurd,' that is, to wager on the flesh knowing full well we will lose.

Ah how shameless – the way these mortals blame the gods.  
From us alone, they say, come all their miseries, yes,  
but they themselves, with their own reckless ways,  
compound their pains beyond their proper share.

*The Odyssey*  
Homer

There is no justice. There are only limits.

*Carnets 1942-1951*  
Camus

**Epilogue: *Myth of Nemesis***

**Epilogue: *Myth of Nemesis****On the shadow of the first lie*

In chapter one, I noted that the early lyrical essays treat the same themes as those discussed in *Le Mythe*, to wit, life, death and suffering. However, whereas in the early essays Camus maintains a balance between love and revolt, between the *yes* and *no* to existence understood as tragic, this equilibrium appears to be lost by the time he writes *Le Mythe*. I asserted that one is rooted in the world in and through the fact of love. In a world without love, one is cut loose and set adrift. Otherwise said, love is attended by a visceral trust in existence and an equally visceral sense of distrust results from its absence. I also claimed that Camus's odyssey is to find his way back to the rootedness described in the lyrical essays which is markedly absent in *Le Mythe*. Finally, I suggested that the latter text is marked by a curious absence of love and thus ends as it begins – in nihilism.

I also asked but left unanswered two questions. The first concerns the lucid invitation to live which Camus extends to his readers. The question is what this invitation entails. This will be considered last. The other question is what, in Camus's second approach to existence, eclipses the *yes* to existence and as such eclipses existence, if indeed it requires both our assent and refusal? What throws a shadow such that the light in which Camus rejoices in the early lyrical essays is obscured? Otherwise said, what is the nature of the shadow that falls between the lyrical essays and *Le Mythe*?

Once again, in the first light, Camus sees and describes the creation, the body, as beautiful. It is beautiful and it is good. It is our unfaith, our abstraction from our living

reality which renders it ‘unnatural,’ ‘sinful.’ The first lie is that I am not this body, this ‘absolutely insignificant and absolutely irreplaceable’ singular being. The first lie is that I am not this living dying body, this fragile finality. I believe we live in the shadow of the first lie or better, the effects of the first lie, just as did Camus’s era. The result of this first lie is spirit or consciousness considered in itself as my ownmost, my self, my freedom and so forth. And it is this shadow of the body which has asserted its independence in the history of the West, leading to a slow attenuation of the flesh and blood man. Fear of death and the evil of which we are all capable led to the abandonment of the body, that is, of the whole man. And with this abstraction from the living dying being, the (severed) body was denigrated, denied and overstepped. The first limit was thereby denied and overstepped. Otherwise said, we have been refused by our shadow. I believe it is precisely our shadow which falls between the lyrical essays and *Le Mythe*. Otherwise said, it is the shadow of the body, of the whole man, which has obscured the first light.

Camus writes in *Le Mythe* that

a moment always comes when the mind negates the truths that... hands can touch. A moment comes when the creation ceases to be taken tragically; it is merely taken seriously. Then man is concerned with hope. But that is not his business. His business is to turn away from subterfuge. (MS 123-4)

And in a notebook entry of late 1938, he claims that “[t]hought is always out in front. It sees too far – further than the body, which lives in the present. To abolish hope is to bring thought back to the body. And the body is doomed to perish” (NB/35: 59). In brief, the fear of death and of the evil of which we are capable inexorably lead to the abandonment of the body, that is, of the flesh and blood man.

Closely paraphrasing Camus, it can be said that ‘abandoned to the shadows, we have turned our backs upon the fixed and radiant point of the present. We no longer believe in the things that exist in the world and in living man; the secret is that the West no longer loves life’ (R 305). Spirit or consciousness considered in abstraction from the radical finitude of the creature is the first sundering. We have subsequently attempted to redeem it – to return to the good, to the natural. But this is a construct only after its first destruction. Rather than a construct, Camus’s work concerns the restoration of limits – those of the body. However, if the original sundering is not recognized, if the first lie is not refused, there is no way back. There is only repetition. One need undergo then, which I suggest is precisely what the work of Camus demanded of him and asks of the reader.

*A provisional conclusion – Leap or wager?*

Camus tended to leave his cycles, and thus his work, open-ended. In terms of the works of fiction considered in this paper, *L’Etranger* of the first cycle aims to induce the experience of the absurd in the reader – judgment is demanded of her or the willingness to suspend it. That is, the reader is left to decide how to interpret the facts of Meursault’s case or short of that, to remain stymied. The aim of *La Peste*, the companion novel of the cycle on revolt, is to evince in the reader a sense of suffocation, exile and suffering. That is, Camus tries to reawaken the memory of terror in the reader. And Rieux makes a rather convincing argument that the absurd is the same thing – over and over again. Yet throughout this chronicle on terror, the possibility of resistance is variously described. Otherwise said, Camus suggests that there are ways of recovering from ‘this revolt of the flesh against our revolting end’ in spite of the fact that there is no remedy.

Finally, *La Chute*, which lies outside of Camus's cycles and thereby, stands alone. I believe this novel challenges the reader to revolt against the humiliating image of man drawn by Clamence, who also stands alone, and against the humiliation that he appears to desire for the addressee, which is ultimately his own. The reader is thereby invited to succumb or revolt. And if he has undergone, even to a minor degree, the experience of humiliation evinced by *La Chute*, he knows there is no alternative to these. In succumbing, one confirms Clamence's vision of the world as hell and thus becomes one with the last man. In rebelling against the revolting image of man which Clamence proffers as a mirror, one upholds the dignity of both oneself and of Clamence.

One upholds the first man, then, as “[e]very man is the first man, nobody is” (NB/51: 125). We all share in the innocence of the first man, just as we have all committed acts for which we are guilty or better, responsible. In *L’Homme révolté*, Camus asserts that “[w]e all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to fight them in ourselves and in others” (301). The choice, of course, is ours. And in a notebook entry of August 8, 1957, he claims that “I have always believed that creation was a dialogue” (NB/51: 191). In fighting against the plague which is a part of each of us, in rebelling against the revolting image of man which Clamence proffers as a mirror, in saying both *no* and *yes* to Clamence, one also upholds the possibility of dialogue which is the precondition of creation, of something other than this hell to which Western man has been delivered.

Camus's works of fiction are literal images of the body or at least of various visceral experiences the reader may have undergone or may yet undergo. Each novel

attempts to invoke that about which it is a literal image. The experience of the absurd delivers one to an all but impassable solitude. If confronted, it induces despair or revolt says Camus. It can induce a boredom felt in the bones, making one literally bone weary. It may induce fear at a point or at times. Possible responses are rage; anger; scorn; cynicism; or a radical indifference. Despair takes on many forms. The range of emotions that the experience of the absurd can induce is wide, then. The extremes are despair and revolt, however. That is, *in extremis*, there are two possible reactions – one succumbs or one revolts. One remains in an impossible solitude or one wagers on the first man who is a part of each of us.

Camus's major analytic works are also open-ended. Entirely so in the case of *L'Homme révolté*, the last section of which concerns the possibility of a renaissance of the Western culture after having diagnosed the disease – the flight of Western man from nature, that is, from the body – which has delivered us solely to nihilism. Things are somewhat more ambiguous when it comes to the consequences Camus derives from the experience of the absurd described in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, however. There Camus concludes that we live in a closed universe in which the human condition is futureless. In short, there is no hope as he proclaims in his first lyrical essay 'Irony:' "Death for us all, but his own death to each" (29).

For Camus, the fact that we will die is definitive. Of this at least he is certain. As he writes in *Le Mythe*,

I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand. (51)

This is how Camus sees. And this experience of reality informs his work from beginning to end, from the early lyrical essays right through to *La Chute*. While I have not discussed *Le premier homme* in this thesis, the same sensibility underlies Camus's unfinished autobiographical novel. In a footnote to this text, he states that "the book should be heavy with things and flesh" (105). And in an endnote he writes,

Adolescence. His drive to life, his faith in life. But he is spitting blood. So that is what life will be, a hospital, death, solitude, this absurdity.... And in his very depths: no, no, life is something else. (315)

The obvious question is whether this vision of reality – that of a closed universe and a futureless condition – is closed or open-ended. Otherwise said, is it nihilistic? And what does he mean by life being 'something else,' something different from death?

Again, the leap of the irrationalists and rationalists "restores in [them] the eternal and its comforts" (MS 50), whether it be understood in terms of faith in God, Reason or History. It seems their universe is not closed. Nor do they consider the human condition futureless. They are sure of the eternal, that is, of that which transcends and justifies this universe. Or at the very least they share a faith in it. Indeed, they are all oriented toward a future condition which, with minor variations, concerns progress toward a promised land. In opposition to this 'final' leap, Camus wagers on the flesh knowing full well he will lose. This wager results in the impasse reached in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, that of our ordinary solitude. How to live in such a desert?

An impasse is a deadlock. And a deadlock is 'a situation in which no progress can be made.' So says the OED. And as Beckett says, 'there's nowhere else to go.' A radical awareness of finitude undercuts any notion of progress. What progress is possible in a



futureless condition? Arguably, the notion of progress does not take time tragically but merely seriously. Grant for a moment that the human condition is futureless. In such a condition there is only beginning – over and over again, within this closed circle of existence wherein “[r]eal generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present” (R 304). Otherwise said, there is only the present on this view of existence. What is won if only in the short term?

In *Le Mythe*, Camus concludes that “the body, affection, creation, action, human nobility will then resume their places in this mad world. At last man will again find there the wine of the absurd and the bread of indifference on which he feeds his greatness” (52). And in *L’Homme révolté* he asserts that “rebellion cannot exist without a strange form of love. Those who find no rest in God or in history are condemned to live for those who, like themselves, cannot live: in fact, for the humiliated” (304). The wager, then, in opposition to the leap, entails solely the maintenance of a quiet faith in man.

Recall here Camus’s understanding of nihilism. With Nietzsche, the nihilist ‘is not the one who believes in nothing but the one who does not believe in what exists.’ Is believing in what exists, in ‘what I touch, what resists me,’ nihilistic? In chapter four, I noted the distinction between a religious logic and the logic of existence which underlies the distinction between the sacred world and that of revolt. Camus lived, as do we, during an ‘unsacrosanct period of history.’ For Camus, however, who lived according to the logic of existence, life itself is sacred, is the holy. Arguably, a religious logic is, even at the best of times, already the beginning of an abstraction from our first intimation of the sacred, of ‘something different’ than life in any modern city or for that matter, ancient. A

religious logic begins to ‘name’ what is, in the first instance an intimation, a glimpse, a gift.

Also recall what Camus claims about ‘naming’ in his 1950 essay “The Enigma,” in which he speaks of people asking him to identify what it is he seeks. He writes,

I do not know what I am looking for, cautiously I give it a name, I withdraw what I said, I repeat myself, I go backward and forward. Yet people insist I identify my term or terms, once and for all. Then I object; when things have a label aren’t they already lost? (LCE 155)

I suggest that this hesitation to name is an echo of Nietzsche’s comment about inspiration. In the subsection of *Ecce Homo* entitled “Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None,” Nietzsche asserts of inspiration that like revelation,

[o]ne hears, one does not seek; *one accepts, one does not ask who gives*; like lightening, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form – I never had any choice.<sup>91</sup>

We are creatures. One accepts, one does not ask who gives. One refrains from naming. The heart of the matter for both Nietzsche and Camus is a sense of deep thankfulness for the gift, be it inspiration or life itself, rather than a focus on the giver. That is the giver’s side, not ours. We are the creatures. This is the kingdom. This is our side. As Camus writes,

[w]e belong to the world which does not last. And everything which does not last – and only that – is ours. What we must do then is wrench love back from eternity or at least from those who disguise it as an image of eternity. (NB/42: 37)

In a notebook entry in the summer of 1938, Camus proclaims, “The misery and greatness of this world: it offers no truths, but only objects of love. Absurdity is king, but

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<sup>91</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*. In *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 756. Italics are mine.

love saves us from it” (NB/35: 53). There is no absolute meaning to existence about which we can be certain here and now. There is only you, I and the world – objects of love – and the ties that bind, namely, love and resistance to that which wants to crush the irreducible element in each of us. With Camus, we are thereby returned to a primordial sense of religiosity, that of the ties that bind.

Existence understood in terms of an odyssey as opposed to a pilgrimage neither seeks nor finds a remedy to the human condition. Rather, it concerns the recovery of it and of the grandeur of man’s condition in all its agony and glory. On this view, there is no solution to the human condition. There is solely the quest to be human which entails the defence of the irreducible element of man. And there is a choice between a graceful and grateful acceptance of life and an absolute refusal of it, be it one of physical or intellectual suicide.

#### Camus asks in “The Desert”

what more legitimate harmony can link a man to life than the twin awareness of his longing to endure and the death that awaits him? At least he learns to count on nothing and to see the present as the only truth given to us ‘as a bonus’. (LCE 101-2)

It is this twin awareness which returns us to the present – to the kingdom and to each other. This ‘love [of life] which lies outside of anything eternal’ is “one way for man to maintain in the highest manner the best part of himself. This is how faithfulness recovers its value” (NB/42: 36). The philosophies of eternity assure one of a future condition, of a promised land which justifies all suffering. One need not wager on the flesh. One need only leap. If the end is known in advance, if we are certain that our appeal will be heard, as is the case with the philosophies of eternity, why bother? The suffering we undergo is

mocked in such a vision of existence. Why bother undergoing it if the end of the story is already granted?

For Camus, our task is to fight against that which wants to oppress the irreducible element in each of us. What Camus intends by ‘this irreducible element in man’ can now be stated. In *L’Homme révolté* he writes,

We insist that the part of man which cannot be reduced to mere ideas should be taken into consideration – the passionate side of his nature that serves no other purpose than to be part of the act of living. (19)

Otherwise said, we are to return to the status of the creature, to being part of the act of living. Camus’s odyssey, or the odyssey of the body to which his life work witnesses, testifies to his choice to return to animated being, to sentient flesh, to the whole man, that is, to the first truth, that of the sacred flesh.

The first question I asked in chapter one is thereby answered. Sinking into the bitter truths of the body, and from this vantage point surveying the desert across the whole of his works, Camus extends an invitation to live lucidly. As always, he leaves it to the reader to decide. But I leave the last word to Camus:

At this meridian of thought, the rebel thus rejects divinity in order to share in the struggles and destiny of all men. We shall choose Ithaca, the faithful land, frugal and audacious thought, lucid action, and the generosity of the man who understands. In the light, the earth remains our first and our last love. Our brothers are breathing under the same sky as we; justice is a living thing. Now is born that strange joy which helps one live and die, and which we shall never again postpone to a later time. (R 306)

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*Abbreviation Key to the Works of Albert Camus*

A/I and A/II – *Actuelles I and II* in Vol. 5 of *Œuvres complètes d'Albert Camus*

Combat – *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947*

Dis – *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism* (1936 Dissertation)

F – *The Fall*

LCE – *Lyrical and Critical Essays*

L'E – *The Outsider*

Letters – “Letters to a German Friend”

MS – *The Myth of Sisyphus*

NB/35 – *Notebooks 1935-1942*

NB/42 – *Notebooks 1942-1951*

NB/51 – *Notebooks 1951-1959*

P – *The Plague*

R – *The Rebel*

RR – “Remarque sur la révolte”

RRD – *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*