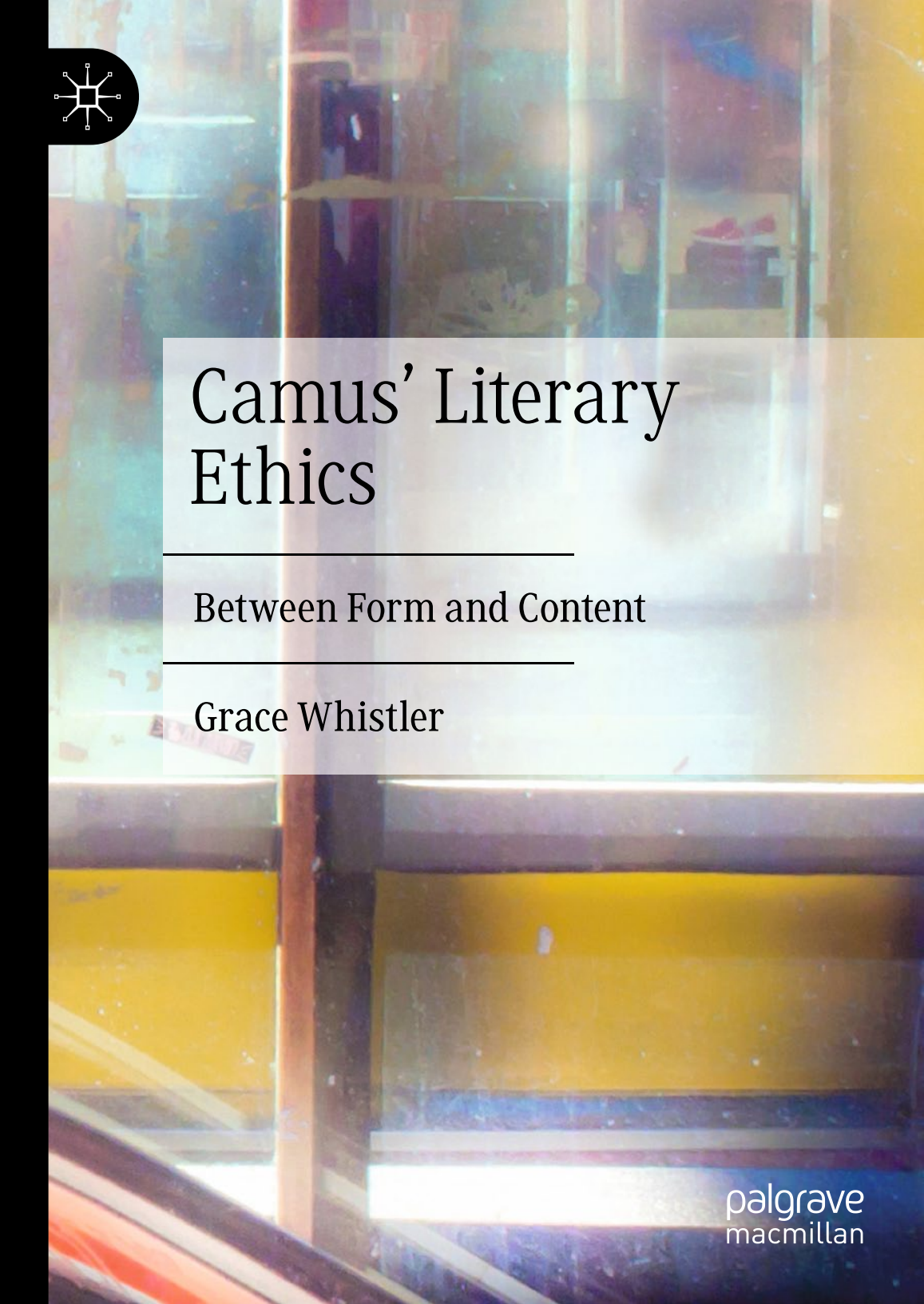

Camus' Literary Ethics

Between Form and Content

Grace Whistler

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Camus' Literary Ethics

"From an ethical perspective enhanced by stylistic sensitivity, Grace Whistler examines a number of ways in which Albert Camus gives form to some of his most important views in various works throughout his career. Her book is a fitting response to one of Camus' own concerns, since "donner une forme" is an expression that recurs in his work and reveals his creative process and artistic quest. Camus' Literary Ethics: Between Form and Content also makes a theoretical contribution by exploring, clearly and methodically, and sometimes in the work of other writers, the mutually beneficial relationships between literature and philosophy, as well as the organic links between language and content."

—Sophie Bastien, *Royal Military College of Canada*, author of *Caligula et Camus. Interférences transhistoriques*, co-editor of *Camus, l'artiste and La Passion du théâtre. Camus à la scène*

"Camus once observed: 'If you want to be a philosopher, write novels.' Perhaps it is the inability of most philosophers to write novels that leads them to think that Camus is not a philosopher. In her empathic and exacting study, Camus' Literary Ethics: Between Form and Content, Grace Whistler shows that Camus saw a connection that some philosophers miss. She presents clear and convincing evidence that Camus excelled at doing philosophy by writing great literature. Her argument does justice to Camus' use of various literary forms to give expression to philosophical content, but it is strongest when she shows how Camus composes novels expressing values worth living and dying for. This book should finally put to rest the distorted picture of the artist as an absurdist, 'existentialist', and nihilist."

—George Heffernan, *Professor of Philosophy, Merrimack College, USA*

"Grace Whistler, in this astute and authoritative study, argues persuasively that the true originality of Camus as an ethical thinker emerges not through focusing separately on his philosophy or his novels but through recognising how the philosophical and the literary are inextricably integrated in his writing."

—Peter Lamarque, *Professor of Philosophy at the University of York, UK*, author of *The Philosophy of Literature* (2008) and *The Opacity of Narrative* (2014)

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Contents

1

Introduction: Context, Form, and Content

1 Camus the Philosopher?

Anyone working on Camus in the context of contemporary philosophy is all too familiar with the experience of having to justify one's reasons for doing so—Camus 'the philosopher' has long gone out of fashion in academic philosophy. Numerous commentators portray him as a *romancier/moraliste* whose ideas nevertheless lacked philosophical depth (e.g. Bronner 1999; Sherman 2008). Walter Kaufmann writes, 'Camus is a fine writer, but not a philosopher' (Kaufmann 1959, 90), while Tony Judt nicknames him 'Camus the Just' (Judt 1998, 100). As Jacob Golomb puts it, 'Of the few scholars still interested in Camus, most esteem his literary genius but denigrate his importance as a philosopher' (Golomb 1994, 268). Such pervading approaches can be traced all the way back to Camus' famous spat with Sartre, who was perhaps the first to draw attention to what he saw as Camus' 'philosophical incompetence'. Sartre asked of him:

> What if your book simply shows your philosophical incompetence? What if it is made up of second-hand knowledge, hastily collected? … And if

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> your reasoning is inaccurate? And if your thoughts are vague and banal? … You hate difficulties of thought and you hastily decree that there is nothing to understand, in order to avoid reproaches of not having understood things. (In Heims 2003, 48)

As such, those working on Camus in philosophy often feel the need to argue the case for him to be considered a philosopher at all, such as Jane Duran, who dedicates an entire article to the task. She tells us, 'There is a genuinely philosophical side to Camus, and that side is worthy of commentary', even if, as she puts it, 'Camus is most frequently mentioned in literary contexts, even when the label 'existentialist' is applied to him, or even when his work is cited in the same phrase as that of Sartre and Beauvoir' (Duran 2007, 365–371). Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, also coming to his defence, states, 'If being a philosopher is to ask all these questions—not in theoretical, abstract, conceptual form, but … through characters who refuse to be superhuman, through adventures that are played out in everyday real life—then yes, Camus, in his novels as in his essays, was a philosopher' (Lévi-Valensi 1997, 32).[1]

This book will inevitably follow suit to a certain degree, as the need to justify revisiting the philosophy of Albert Camus is ever present,[2] but I shall do this with a view to suggesting something more radical: that it is precisely Camus' philosophical innovations that lead him to be overlooked by contemporary philosophy. Camus *does philosophy differently*, and the significance of his radical experimentation with form is often lost in the contemporary environment of analytic philosophy.[3] Within more literary Camus scholarship, these stylistic innovations have of course not gone unnoticed. Thomas Hanna suggests that the 'interplay between the philosophical and literary concerns of Camus is largely responsible for the richness and value of his writings' (Hanna 1958, 35), and this is certainly true. Peter Roberts goes further still, suggesting that:

> Camus' distinctive blending of the literary with the philosophical prompts readers to reflect on themselves, their motivations and commitments, their relationships with others, and the very process of reflection itself. (Roberts 2008, 875)

Here, Roberts has hit on something which is at the very heart of the current book: the ways in which literary engagement might enrich philosophical understanding. While Roberts does not examine this possibility in any great detail himself, his emphasis on introspection and relations with the Other points towards a further dimension to what I will be arguing for in this book—that is, the creative methods such as those utilised by Camus are particularly well suited to moral philosophy. The ambiguity often entailed in moral life is undoubtedly what is most compelling about many great works of literature (such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*), but such ambiguity is precisely what moral philosophy often tries to eliminate.[4] Hanna sees Camus as 'one of the most prophetic, persuasive, and hopeful moral philosophers of the mid-20th century' (Hanna 1958, viii)—I hope to show that his experimentation with genre is in fact his greatest contribution to moral philosophy. In a sense, this is a claim about the *methodology* of moral philosophy, but as we will see, the methodological choices Camus makes have implications on moral content as well as philosophical form.

Thus, this book is concerned with the *genre* (or *genres*) of moral philosophy and to what extent literary writings such as Camus' can be considered within this bracket. In this introductory chapter, I will therefore begin by raising some questions as to the importance of the role of style in philosophy, followed by a contextual analysis of the relationship between literature and philosophy, and some conditions for the success of literary philosophy. I will also spend some time engaging with the two most fundamental concepts of Camus' philosophy (i.e. 'the absurd' and 'revolt'), but I won't do this extensively here, as these two concepts will crop up again and again in later chapters, when I will apply them to particular case studies of Camus' philosophical and literary writings. Towards the end of this chapter, I will demonstrate the struggle with rhetorical form which is so central to Camus' contribution to moral philosophy. I suggest that Camus saw the relationship between form and content as essential to philosophical understanding, so an examination of the efforts he made towards interweaving the two is in itself facilitative in our ability to grasp his vision of the relationship between literature and philosophy.

2 Philosophical Style: A Superficial Question?

The question of progress in philosophy is the subject of many a wry joke. Despite the thousands of years which have elapsed, we seem to still be asking ourselves the same questions: how does one live well? What separates humanity from the rest of nature? Is there such a thing as a transcendent being? Philosophers today are still searching for solutions to the same problems that plagued Aristotle or Confucius millennia ago. In the last century, however, there is one fundamental change in (at least Anglo-American) philosophy which certainly gives the illusion of progress: the way we communicate our ideas. A look back at the history of philosophy reveals myriad modes of philosophical expression; from poems and aphorisms to dialogues and confessions, the incredible diversity of philosophical writing is apparent. However, from the twentieth century, particularly in the analytic school, contemporary philosophers (following the lead, it has to be said, of a narrowly selected band of canonical authors from the past) have moved away from these ambiguous modes of expression, towards something which is clearer, more precise, and on the whole more uniform. The philosophical treatise, provided it is grounded in strict reasoning and clear argumentation, has become the gold standard for contemporary academic philosophy, a fact which led Arthur C. Danto to remark that 'textual innovativeness has abated in philosophy and all texts are pretty much alike' (Danto 1984, 19). Another commentator on the apparent 'homogeneity' of current philosophical style, Jon Stewart, writes, 'This form of writing has come to dominate the field of academic philosophy so much that for anything to be accepted as genuinely *philosophical*, it must be written in this fashion' (Stewart 2013, 1). Thus, the plethora of earlier genres of philosophical writing has all but become extinct: we study them as relics from a different time, decoding and paraphrasing them to meet our current standards.

While the methods of analytic philosophy certainly seem to yield a degree of clarity and rigour which it might otherwise be difficult to achieve, one cannot help but wonder if it is even possible to translate

works in the history of philosophy into the current stylistic register without losing something important. Jon Stewart argues that:

> An examination of the mode of expression of the philosopher in question can be used as a key to interpreting his thought … the mode of writing they use to express their idea is often inextricably bound up with the content of their philosophy and the arguments that they are trying to articulate. (Stewart 2013, 10)

If, as he suggests, modes of writing are bound up with philosophical content, this not only indicates that it would be reductive to try and translate historical texts into the kind of argumentation favoured today, it also implies that there are certain areas of philosophy which may in fact be poorly suited to this mode of expression. I suggest that moral philosophy is perhaps one such area (an issue I will return to later on in this chapter).

Considering all the modes of philosophical expression which have gone out of fashion, there is also every reason to question whether the kind of philosophical writing currently favoured by academic philosophy may well be just as conditional as, say, Plato's use of dialogue. Stewart again writes, 'Given the contingent nature of philosophical expression, it would seem inappropriate and problematic to assume that the current mode of philosophical writing is the correct or genuinely scientific one' (Stewart 2013, 10). In other words, what's to say that in 20 years or so, the style of writing favoured by academic philosophy won't have changed yet again? It seems necessary, therefore, that we recognise that even contemporary analytic philosophy is *textual* and may in the future be subject to a similar kind of analysis and interpretation as historical philosophical writings are today. Berel Lang too argues for the necessity of acknowledging this possibility; he writes:

> The image of philosophical thought as atemporal and undramatic, as itself non-representational, has been very much taken for granted … Philosophers have persistently seen themselves and persuaded readers to see them as engaged in knowing, in contrast to doing or making and thus beyond the reach of time and of rhetoric. To speak of philosophical texts as literary

> artefacts, then, whatever difficulties it encounters in the way of literary analysis, forces philosophy to an awareness of its historical character—a necessary step if philosophy is to follow its own advice of knowing itself. (Lang 1990, 22)

Any reluctance to accept the textuality of philosophy, Lang sees as unrealistic: 'Only the philosopher who takes as his goal the idea of a disembodied text … will be reluctant to acknowledge that … philosophy characteristically lives inside the text' (Lang 1990, 23). While recognising the literariness of philosophy does not in itself say anything about the 'philosophicalness' of literature, it does again point towards the contingencies of philosophical writing, and reminds us that there may indeed be other ways of doing things.

Numerous other philosophers also raise concerns about the apparent disconnection between form and content in contemporary analytic philosophy. John Cottingham writes,

> The way many contemporary academic philosophers go about their task—maintaining an astringently dry style modelled on legalistic or scientific prose, scrupulously avoiding literary or other potentially emotive allusions … these techniques, even in the hands of the virtuoso practitioner, often seem somehow to miss the mark, or at least to need supplementing. (Cottingham 2005, 3)

This idea that contemporary philosophy needs supplementing in some way is echoed by Robert B. Louden, who suggests that the practice of abstracting which is so common in philosophy is particularly destructive when approaching morality. He suggests, 'The philosopher's natural impulse towards abstraction needs to be continually checked in ethics if we are not to lose sight of our subject matter' (Louden 1998). Of course, philosophical texts are often fleshed out with tailor-made examples, but these tend to be a great deal more precise and limited than any drawn from experience in the real world; while thought experiments might help us to focus on the key philosophical issues at stake, arguably the difficulty of identifying and characterising a moral problem is of philosophical value in itself. It is therefore in the context of such concerns that this

book is situated—I aim to take seriously the idea that 'different literary forms are legitimate means of philosophical expression and entirely appropriate for certain sorts of philosophical arguments', as Stewart puts it (2013, 10).

This dissatisfaction with academic philosophical writing has led numerous other theorists to look towards literature for alternative means of communicating philosophical ideas, in search of an approach which is more representative of human experience than abstract, analytic texts. For many, the virtue of the literary register lies in its capacity to integrate ambiguity succinctly within our encounter with a philosophical problem. Abdelkader Aoudjit argues that, when people read literature for philosophical content:

> It helps them learn to pay attention to the context, details, and nuances of moral situations. … It directs them to accept the inevitable ambiguities and difficulties in attempting to solve moral problems and thereby reflect on the importance and the limits of ethical theory. (Aoudjit 2012, 53)

So, whereas precision and rigour in philosophy aim to eliminate partial cases and delineate apparent grey areas, it seems that literature illustrates something essential about the very nature of morality itself, something that perhaps we might not fully grasp from reading academic philosophy—that is, how very messy and vague moral life often can be. In Alison Denham's words, 'There are kinds of knowledge best conveyed by literary discourse. They are kinds, moreover, which are especially relevant to sound moral judgement' (Denham 2000, 350). There are of course numerous other titles examining the possibility of reading literature as moral philosophy,[5] and so this idea is by no means novel (if we can excuse the pun). To analyse the arguments of every contribution to the debate would merit an entire book-length study in itself—and indeed it would not be fruitful to do so here, as I simply aim to demonstrate the relevance of Albert Camus to this issue. We will, however, take a short detour to look at an exchange on this topic between two polar-opposites, Martha Nusbaum and Richard Posner.

Martha Nussbaum is very much an advocate for the reading of literature for philosophical content, and an important insight of hers is that we

approach different kinds of texts with differing attitudes. She observes how different a reader's attitude towards can be, depending on whether we approach it as 'philosophy' or 'literature'. According to Nussbaum, a literary text,

> enlists in us a trusting and loving activity. We read it suspending scepticism; we allow ourselves to be touched by the text … The attitude we have before a philosophical text can look, by contrast, retentive and unloving—asking for reason, questioning and scrutinising each claim, wresting clarity from the obscure. Before a literary work we are humble, open, active yet porous. Before a philosophical work we are active, controlling, aiming to leave no flank undefended and no mystery undispelled. (Nussbaum 1990, 282)

For Nussbaum, the openness we allow ourselves when reading literature is a positive tool for comprehension, and this certainly seems to make sense in the context of approaching morality. If we are to take into account the numerous factors which affect every moral decision we make (e.g. intentions, motivations, emotional biases), a position of openness will facilitate reflection and understanding much more than the unsympathetic rigour with which we scrutinise a philosophical argument.

By now, we have heard numerous voices questioning the validity of the ways in which contemporary philosophy 'does' ethics—but as yet these voices have gone more or less unchallenged. Responding to Martha Nussbaum's claim that reading novels 'develops moral capacities without which citizens will not succeed in making reality out of the normative conclusions of any moral or political theory, however excellent' (Nussbaum 1995, 12),[6] Richard Posner represents significant challenge to such views, asserting that reading literature for moral content is both misguided and reductive (Posner 1997). His reasons for this are threefold:

> First, immersion in literature does not make us better citizens or better people. … Second, we should not be put off by morally offensive views encountered in literature even when the author appears to share them … Third, authors' moral qualities or opinions should not affect our valuations of their works. (Posner 1997, 2)

The first of these points, I naturally will be contesting throughout the course of this book, but nevertheless I think it worthwhile to look at Posner's reasons for suggesting this here. Posner makes the observation that 'Moral philosophers, their students, literary critics, and English majors are no more moral in attitude or behavior than their peers in other fields' (Posner 1997, 12). While at first glance this might seem blandly true as a broad generalisation, it is more problematic than it might first appear. As the reader is no doubt aware, Posner's real target is Nussbaum's claim that literature can be morally instructive, but in critiquing her arguments, he also (perhaps unwittingly) contests the usefulness of moral philosophy. There are certainly other reasons to read literature than moral improvement (e.g. entertainment), as Posner points out, so this accusation of *ethical* uselessness is not wholly condemning. But if the *study of ethics* is useless for moral improvement, we are left to wonder what the point of the discipline is. Is being morally good therefore simply a fluke? To me, this reveals a touch of nihilism which brings little to the current discussion, as it is not the place of this book to defend moral philosophy's usefulness in general.

More to the point is his conviction that engaging with literature does not help us to become better people—in fact, Posner seems to think that reading literature can even make us worse people. He writes, 'Cultured people are not on the whole morally superior to philistines. Immersion in literature and art can breed rancorous and destructive feelings of personal superiority, alienation, and resentment' (Posner 1997, 5). Despite this seemingly sceptical challenge to the arts in general, in the latter two of his assertions he in fact puts up a spirited defence of the value of literature, aside from any moral value it might have. In these assertions, Posner suggests that (a) we should not be put off by morally offensive views encountered in literature even when the author appears to share them, and (b) authors' moral qualities or opinions should not affect our valuations of their works. While I agree with both of these points, I think it worthwhile to look a little closer, to see whether they really have as much bearing on the validity of reading literature for ethical content as Posner suggests.

In response to Posner's second point, I think it suffices to say that, despite 'the world of literature [being] a moral anarchy' (Posner 1997, 5), as he puts it, bad examples are just as interesting, ethically speaking, as

good ones[7]—after all, conventional moral philosophy uses thought experiments depicting highly problematic human conduct as one of its primary tools. This response might also therefore be successful in addressing the third of his points—just because an author might hold some repugnant views, it does not mean that they write 'bad' novels, or even that as readers, we are impressionable enough to adopt their views unreflectively. Posner himself writes:

> Most readers accept the presence of obsolete ethics in literature with the same equanimity that they accept the presence of obsolete military technology or antiquated diction or customs in literature, as things both inevitable, given the antiquity of so much literature, and incidental to the purpose for which we read literature. (Posner 1997, 7)

And so Posner suggests that we are able to recognise problematic or outdated content in literature, and that in fact, most readers don't let such content, or indeed moral judgements about the author, seriously affect their literary judgements.

What does not follow from this, however, is the assumption that this ability to distance ourselves critically from the moral content of a novel (or indeed the views of the author) means that we cannot learn anything from novels. In fact, my disagreement with Posner seems to stem from a difference in the kind of thing I suggest we might learn from novels. I do not mean to suggest we should be categorising novels, or the events and characters in them as 'morally good' or 'morally bad'—this would be rather unproductive, philosophically. Neither do I claim that we should naively seek out examples of good behaviour in novels and try to follow them in real life. Instead, I am suggesting that the moral content of novels is something that promotes reflection and compassion—even (and perhaps particularly) the elements that we would consider to be morally bad. In our ability to identify obsolete values, we may also evaluate them from the outside and compare them to our own. Consequently, at no point in this book will I be looking for a clear-cut definition of moral good. When Camus' philosophy points towards his own opinion of what is morally good (e.g. the concept of revolt), I examine this with interest as to how he communicates his ethics—that is to say, emphasising the method and form, rather than simply evaluating the content.

Interestingly enough Posner admits that there are many things one can learn from reading literature. He writes:

> In reading literature we are also learning about the values and experiences of cultures, epochs, and sensibilities remote from our own, yet not so remote as to be unintelligible. We are acquiring experience vicariously by dwelling in the imaginary worlds that literature creates. We are expanding our emotional as well as our intellectual horizons. An idea can usually be encoded straightforwardly enough and transferred more or less intact to another person … Imaginative literature can engender in its readers emotional responses to experiences that they have not had. (Posner 1997, 19)

In this imaginative activity, Posner suggests that we respond emotionally to experiences that do not belong to us—one would struggle to think of a more straightforward definition of empathy. However, Posner simply does not see this empathetic engagement as being morally significant. As he puts it, 'I agree that literature is one path … to a better understanding of the needs, problems, and point of view of human types that we are unlikely to encounter at first hand. But I do not think that a better understanding of people makes a person better or more just' (Posner 1997, 19). Here I disagree with Posner—it seems clear to me that a better understanding of others (particularly one which stems from empathetic imaginative engagement) would encourage us to make decisions which take the needs of others into consideration. There are undoubtedly countless examples of instances in which feelings of empathy or compassion impel people to behave in what we might consider a morally good manner; when we see the suffering of others, it certainly seems to be a normal human response to consider the possibility of alleviating it (the reasoning behind charity infomercials is based precisely on this notion). If we take empathy to be morally valuable in itself (as I suggest we should), then the question of how this empathy is developed (i.e. through the contemplation of real or fictional suffering) seems somewhat irrelevant.

Something that Posner does grant to literature, however, is its ability to help us get to know ourselves better. He writes, 'Literature helps us make sense of our lives, helps us to fashion an identity for ourselves' (Posner 1997, 20). He accepts self-knowledge can be developed through literature, but I would respond that this only happens via

what me might call 'other-knowledge'. We certainly do acquire a kind of knowledge of the Other (i.e. characters) through literature,[8] and in encountering these different perspectives and personalities, we might get a sense of our own values and personalities aligning or juxtaposing with them—I suggest that this is how we might improve our self-knowledge from reading novels. We may also feel some compassion or empathy towards these characters (as Posner seems to suggest), and as I have argued, this can be morally valuable. Where I differ from Posner, then, is in suggesting that this emotional response is something that we can then productively apply to the real world. In studying ethics, we assume that the reasoning we practise in response to philosophical texts will have some bearing on the real world. I fail to understand why reasoning is the sole feature of moral philosophy which can have implications outside of a text—and why shouldn't the very real sense of compassion we sometimes feel for characters also have some application outside of their fictional worlds? Just how a text might elicit this transferability is something that I will attempt to address throughout this book.

Of course, suggesting that the emotions might have a role to play in philosophical reason is somewhat controversial. Numerous sceptical voices in the history of philosophy object to the use of philosophical language that appeals to the emotions or aesthetic judgements, perhaps the oldest and most famous example of which being poetry's proscription from the *polis* in Book Ten of Plato's *Republic* (Plato 2011). This mistrust of emotive and literary rhetoric has been immensely influential throughout the history of philosophy. Let us take, for example, the following famous passage of Locke's *Essay*:

> Language is often abused by figurative speech. Since wit and fancy find easier entertainment in the world than dry truth and real knowledge, figurative speeches and allusion in language will hardly be admitted as an imperfection or abuse of it. I confess, in discourses where we seek rather pleasure and delight than information and improvement, such ornaments as are borrowed from them can scarce pass for faults. But yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides

> order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats: and therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them. (Locke 1975, III.X.34)

According to Locke, rhetoric can be alluring and misleading, making it too dangerous a tool to be applied to philosophical problems, which should be approached with cool reason. While there can of course be terrible consequences when our emotions run away with us (revenge, 'crimes of passion', etc.), I would emphasise that the particular emotion which I am arguing is most relevant for ethics is compassion. If we can develop our understanding of others through engaging with literature, as well as learning to respond to the suffering of others with compassion, this seems like a much less destructive interplay of emotions and reason than is feared by Plato and his followers.

Considering the way in which readers sometimes find themselves sympathising with the unlikeliest of characters (e.g. Heathcliff from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, or Dmitry from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*),[9] it seems reasonable to assume that there is a difference between the ways in which we approach fictional and factual instances of immorality (as Nussbaum, and even Posner, seem to suggest). However, while this openness we experience certainly affects our ability to empathise with characters in literature (which is perhaps a good thing in itself), and we might even believe (as I have argued here) that this empathetic development might improve our ability to empathise with people in the real world, this kind of approach still leaves a number of questions unanswered. For example, can literature really lay any claim on truth in the same way that philosophy aims to? Philosophy persuades using reason and argumentation—is there such a thing as literary reasoning? This next section will try to answer some of these questions.

3 On the Possibility of a Literary Philosophy

It is fair to say that all philosophy is always to some extent concerned with truth. Traditionally conceived, philosophy is the practice of investigating the world around us using our powers of reason, with a view to understanding it—and even ourselves—all the better. Whether or not we aspire to any grand notions of objective truth or universality, in philosophy, real-life examples are used with a view to formulating a more general principle which we might apply to the world as it really is. Novels and other forms of literary narratives, on the other hand, focus on fictional characters which represent a view on a fictional world, and thus the question of whether they can really tell us anything true is a tricky one. However (excluding examples of fantasy, sci-fi, and surrealism which follow the stories of non-human characters and their inner lives), many works of fiction attempt to portray human beings and their inner lives in a convincing, if not true-to-life manner—even if the truth that is being conveyed is something elusive, and the forms expressing it experimental. If they are well-written, they are to some degree successful in this venture, and something in them rings true to us; the more successful they are in this respect, the more we are likely to engage with them on a reflective level. I suggest, therefore, that well-crafted literary examples of human beings and their moral lives are, so to speak, as relevant as any examples we might encounter from people in the real world, as our perspectives on the inner lives of people we meet are just as partial as the perspective we can gain from fiction (if not even more so). The moral problems that characters face are often simulations of real-life human problems, formulated by a human author, intended for human moral engagement. This indicates that, as Nussbaum et al. suggest, novels and other fictional writings are perfectly good candidates for moral engagement. If we accept this, I see no reason why we would assume the moral insights we obtain from our engagement with literature to be false or useless, despite the fact that they are based on the lives of fictional characters.

Having done away (for our purposes) with the apparent problem of the fictional nature of moral examples in literature, it remains to be seen

whether such specific examples could have any bearing on the world in general. In his seminal text *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*,[10] Bernard Williams raised concerns about the state of contemporary academic philosophy, criticising it for being 'determined to impose rationality through reductive theory' (Williams 1983, 219). He writes:

> The resources of most modern moral philosophy are not well adjusted to the modern world … It is not involved enough; it is governed by a dream of a community of reason that is too far removed … from social and historical reality and from any concrete sense of a particular ethical life. (Williams 1983, 219–220)

For Williams, the idea that, in the modern world, humanity could be united by any universal standard of ethics is outdated and unrealistic. The ethical clashes we encounter today (in a world in which previously established values are continuously being challenged) mean that particularity and subjectivity seem to deserve ever more serious consideration in ethics.

As we have already said, philosophy often aims towards the formulation of universal principles, which hope to be generally applicable. But while there may be objective truths about the universe, and perhaps even about human nature, I suggest that ethical engagement with subjective perspectives allows us to reflect on the possibility that there is no *moral* truth—that is, no objective good and bad. In encountering perspectives which deviate from our own, the subject, as Mulhall puts it,

> acknowledges herself as merely other to that other, her own way no more well-grounded than that of her other; in short, she learns from that other the contingency of her own ways of going on. She might even find the other's deviance to open up possibilities that her own conformity occludes, to teach her something about herself and what she represents. (Mulhall 2002, 317)

In essence, we can be shown the partiality of our own convictions, and from this we reason that *all* convictions are particular. But denying an objective basis for morality is not the same as saying 'it's all just

subjective', and therefore futile. Instead, the conflict between our own moral judgements and those of characters means that the only moral progress we can achieve is that of sincerely making an effort to comprehend perspectives which are contrary to our own (which is of course more difficult in the real world than when we are 'open' before a work of literature). In this sense, I suggest that this approach to ethics is rather 'intersubjective'—not objective fact, nor entirely subjective, but instead something which must be understood in the context of difference and conflict, between the self and the Other. Works of fiction are particularly opportune arenas for this kind of effort, as it is unusual that we would want to spend as much time trying to understand people with values we find objectionable, as we do with fictional characters. I suggest, therefore, that perhaps the very fact of making this kind of effort (i.e. attentively engaging with opposing moral perspectives within fiction), we are better equipped to deal with moral quandaries in the real world.

So, as is becoming clear, the fact that literature deals with the particular and subjective, whereas philosophy normally aims towards generality and universality, is not so much of a problem as it first appeared; nor it seems is the issue of truth versus fictionality. What remains to be seen is whether literary philosophy can be argumentative in the same way as philosophy. At the bottom of this lies the question of what exactly philosophy is, and more specifically, whether literary philosophy (i.e. philosophy presented in a literary frame) needs to meet the same criteria. As I defined it earlier, 'philosophy is the practice of investigating the world around us using our powers of reason, with a view to understanding it—and even ourselves—all the better'. The pivotal word in this definition is 'reason', as defining human reason is not necessarily as easy as it might first appear. In contemporary analytic philosophy, the standard of reasoning aimed for is one that can be translated into formal logic, its validity and soundness testable in truth tables, its conclusions following neatly on from premises, and so on. In the real world, the moral decisions we make are rarely so easy to pick apart and examine. As I argued in the previous section, fiction's ability to encompass this ambiguity is in many ways its strength. Here I would also like to suggest that narrative contains its own

kind of reason—one much more like the one we practise in the real world, outside of academic philosophy. Aoudjit writes:

> Many works of literature depict moral problems from the perspective of those who experience them in all their ambiguities and contradictions. Likewise, many works of literature ring more true to life than philosophy does because they present a person's moral point of view in the context of the narrative or narratives that shape his or her self-understanding. (Aoudjit 2012, 52)

In other words, narratives in literature mimic a kind of narrative sense of self, situating moral issues within a context with a similar level of complexity and nuance as they would be in real life.

I do not make such a claim about narrative understanding naïve of its contentiousness. Sartre once wrote, 'A man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him *in terms of* these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it' (in Strawson 2004, 435).[11] While this seems to vouch for the human impulse towards narrativity, Sartre is really describing our tendency to tell stories as something negative and inauthentic. In other words, to act in accordance with what we thought our narrative to be would be both dishonest and fatalistic. More recently, Galen Strawson has voiced objections to the idea of narrativity. Not only does he agree with Sartre's observation of the inauthenticity bound up in any impulse to narrate our lives, Strawson goes even further, dismissing the very idea that humans in general understand themselves narratively, and thus he thinks assigning any value to self-narrative is destructive (Strawson 2004, 435). In light of these criticisms, I will now attempt to assuage some of the doubts we might have about narrativity.

Whilst I argue that real-life narrative often plays an important role in trying to understand the events of our lives, I am not suggesting that these narratives are always conscious or purposefully creative, or even that this implies destiny or reasonable justification (as Sartre suggests). I am merely suggesting that the process of endeavouring to understand oneself (and indeed the Other), involves testing hypotheses of cause (or motives) and effect (or actions). These are based in non-empirical evidence (such

as emotions and biases), and each evaluation we make is, in a weak sense, judging the plausibility of a story. As Walter Fisher, a pioneering advocate of narrativity, writes:

> Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing narrative fidelity, whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives. (Fisher 1984, 7–8)

If we accept this perspective, self-narration is not necessarily a dangerous tendency, but in fact one that represents a huge potential for improved self-understanding which perhaps other scientific or even philosophical modes of enquiry are less well-equipped to deliver.

Furthermore, I am not assigning any special moral value to narrativity—that is, I am not saying that we *ought* to construct narratives about ourselves. I understand and agree with Galen Strawson's suspicion of this approach; telling stories to ourselves, about ourselves, can no doubt be inauthentic, cowardly, or destructive, as Strawson suggests (2004, 435) in that it could lead us to make excuses for our actions, in the hope of coming off as a hero, rather than villain. In this respect, however, I suggest that this corruptibility is not singularly a feature of narrative—the skilled logician can 'prove' the morality of many an unconscionable deed. All I am suggesting is that narrative is a way of making sense of a series of (possibly unconnected) events. Tying events together in this way does not necessarily imply causality, but correlation can often help reveal a pattern that can help us to understand a set of data better. If we were to say of a play, 'the ending didn't make any sense', we are probably referring to an internal logic to the plot (a combination of characters and their personality traits, events, and the responses to them that we, as readers, try and make sense of). To say that the ending of a play 'didn't make sense' is to suggest that according to the *logic* of the play, the conclusion didn't follow from the premises. As well as the issue of corruptibility of narrative, there is also an element of human fallibility to be considered. But there are as many poor arguments in philosophy as there are false self-narratives, and misunderstanding and misinterpretation are just as possible with logical argumentation as in narrative. If we recognise this, then it becomes clear

that poor reasoning may be just as destructive or inauthentic as poor self-narration.

Thus, rather than arguing that all stories we might tell ourselves are true, or even that a narrative life is a good life, I am simply arguing that narrative can be used effectively as a way of encouraging reflection on ethical issues. Richard Wollheim describes the action that facilitates moral reflection:

> There is a natural assimilation of the stories that novels tell to those more primitive stories that we, idly and less idly, tell ourselves, and a feature of phantasy is that, as we tell it to ourselves, our viewpoint changes: we identify now with one character, now with another, now with some-thing impersonal that lies outside all characters. (Wollheim 1983, 186)

Stories can only be fully evaluated when we know their endings, so it might be that narrative understanding is best applied to real life retroactively[12]—figuring out why things happened, rather than deciding what you should do in the future based on what sort of person you are 'telling yourself' you are. We should not read fiction in the hope of finding guidance for the exact situations we find ourselves in—rather I'm suggesting that narrative insight into the experience, emotions, and suffering of characters (and consequently others) makes for a kind of moral education in itself. Reading literature does not provide propositional advice on how to deal with a moral dilemma, it is more like practice at the skill of narrative reasoning, and thus comprehension.

We might also say that there are some things that philosophy can successfully talk about that literature can't (e.g. metaethics) and we might think about this as being a matter of precision and clarity that fiction can't offer. However, this simply shows the degree of abstraction that philosophy has reached in areas such as this. Bernard Williams hopefully suggested that:

> There could be a way of doing moral philosophy that started from the ways in which we experience our ethical life. Such a philosophy would reflect on what we believe, feel, take for granted; the ways in which we confront obligations and recognize responsibility; the sentiments of guilt and shame. It would involve a phenomenology of the ethical life. (Williams 1983, 104)

I suggest that literary approaches to ethics offer precisely what Williams envisaged. Philosophical literature speaks to the particular (the reader) on the subject of the general (human nature, etc.). Particular examples (e.g. plots) are what is needed to make general philosophical theses more persuasive. The setting (which might simply resemble our real world but with subtle emphasis on certain philosophical aspects of it) acts as a set of premises, from which the reader must draw conclusions. This dialogue between particular and general, between subjective and objective, is what exemplifies the philosophical power of literature. It is not just strict reasoning we follow, but also a dialogue between particulars against the background of some more general truth about the world (or setting) we inhabit. It is for this reason that I suggest that moral philosophy is still philosophy even when it doesn't just rely on logic, but other means too. Emotions are ineliminable when it comes to morality, as is bias, and while philosophy can attempt to circumvent them, we must acknowledge the fact they will always to some extent be there. Creative philosophical methods can use all the weapons in the arsenal of the human mind, and not just logic, which is often so much less persuasive than all the other experiences in life which test our preconceived ideas.

4 Camus' Philosophy: Some Preliminary Reflections

Having now set out the contextual debates which surround the main thrust of this book, it is time to illustrate how these pertain to the literary philosophy of Albert Camus. As I have argued in the previous section, one of the greatest assets of philosophical fiction is its ability to provide insight into the inner lives of characters, and the moral predicaments they find themselves in. But most good works of fiction communicate this kind of sense of the Other, so surely this cannot mean that most works of literature are also works of philosophy? Of course, I am not about to suggest that it does, as I have no desire to collapse the boundary between philosophy and literature altogether. I suggest instead that philosophical fiction like Camus' harness this latent power within literature to further a philosophical venture, exploring some philosophical problem with a

complex kind of reasoning which appeals to both rationality and emotion. Thus, in the context of Camus' work (and no doubt certain other philosophical works of fiction), literary style becomes philosophical style, because of the philosophical purpose behind it. At this stage, it seems prudent to outline and evaluate exactly what this philosophical venture is in Camus' case.

The most famous of Camus' concepts is arguably 'the absurd'. Understanding this concept is necessary for piecing together much of Camus' later philosophy, as the absurd is something which he takes for granted throughout. In Camus' work, the term 'absurd' refers to a kind of existential dread that humans experience in contemplation of death, and of living life in a universe which is indifferent to us and everything we care about—we must all die, despite our powers of reason and ardent emotions. The absurd is not a characteristic of the universe, nor something inherent in us as humans, but a feature of our encounter with the universe, only existing in our contemplation of our hopeless condition (Camus 2005, 26). The reasoning behind Camus' formulation of the absurd is more or less transparent: if there is no God, or possible transcendence from this life, then our actions are without any transcendent meaning; as humans we are nevertheless invested in our worldly cares and fear death, thus our finitude seems unjust and incomprehensible: this is what Camus means by 'the absurd'. Camus concludes that our caring about this life is enough to make life meaningful, despite our mortal condition (Camus 2005, 119).

This all seems straightforward enough, but Camus does make a number of claims which demand further investigation. First, he assumes that humans have a desire for immortality; this does seem to make sense in that it is certainly difficult to imagine not existing, and the thought of dying is something that we resist. We are also expected to accept his lack of belief in God or transcendence, but he at least offers some explanation for this premise: that humans have invented Gods to try to find some transcendent reasoning, which would make death seem less unfair. The absurd is not therefore a reaction to religion, but the other way around. The absurd precedes everything but human emotion, and our natural fight or flight instinct in the face of death has become an innate part of the way we view the world, and we look for meaning which helps us in

some way to live on beyond the inevitable (even if this transcendence is fictitious).

What cannot necessarily be extrapolated from this (but what Camus nevertheless suggests) is that life is meaningful in spite of this—the meaning of life resides within our care for life and the world around us. This means that human life has no objective value, except the subjective (and intersubjective) value we endow it with. Camus claims that this subjective value is objectively meaningful. This conclusion is particularly fitting to Camus' choice of creative philosophical methods, balancing, as it does, on the divide between the particular and the general (as was discussed in the previous section). It is not that there is nothing but particularity, but the absurd creates a sense of particularity when we consider the inevitable end to all that we create in this life. Thus, the absurd resides precisely in our encounter with the objective, that is, the universe and its indifference to us as subjects. We might even say that the absurd is the conclusion that can be drawn from the premises of the human will to live, and the indifference of the natural world to this will (not that Camus phrases it in these terms).

But as Roger Grenier said, 'It is the point of departure, but Camus didn't adopt the absurd … Camus settled for describing the absurd in order to see how we might escape from it' (Grenier 2014, 48).[13] Camus saw the absurd as a necessary starting point for any meaningful kind of ethics, as human life must be acknowledged as valuable precisely because there is no hope of an afterlife: our joys and suffering are all there is. André Malraux once told Camus, 'You make a sort of morality out of the absurd',[14] which is arguably exactly the point. Stephen Bronner explains, 'He never embraced the relativism generated by the human encounter with death and the absence of God. He sought to create a *positive* morality, if not a system of ethics, capable of providing rules for secular conduct' (Bronner 1999, 152). (Camus' response to Christian belief in transcendence will be examined in more detail in Chap. 2). This 'positive morality' that Camus sought to create is developed most fully in *L'Homme révolté*, in which he expounds his concept of 'revolt' as the basis for ethics. By 'revolt', Camus refers to a moment of inner rebellion, which stems from the human recognition of the injustice of suffering. In this instant, as the human rails against their own mistreatment, according to Camus,

this is when we begin to feel a sense of solidarity for others; he writes, 'When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and, from his point of view, human solidarity is metaphysical' (Camus 2000, 22–23)—it is a sense of solidarity for all other humans against the metaphysical injustice of finitude. The act of rebellion affirms the value of human life, representing human 'unity against the suffering of life and death' (Camus 2000, 30). For Camus, only a sense of human suffering can found a morality, so we must therefore open ourselves up to this 'collective unhappiness' (Camus 2000, 28) to make ethical progress. As Camus put it in his own ethical *cogito*, 'I revolt, therefore we are' (Camus 2006, III: 79).[15]

This reasoning follows on from the 'absurd reasoning' in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* that we saw earlier on: if my life is meaningful in spite of the absurd, then other people's lives are meaningful too; if we recognise other people's lives as meaningful (despite our mortal condition), then we feel solidarity towards them, *ergo*: the absurd is the condition for morality—we as humans all face it together and need to stand up for each other. Other than the issues concerning the absurd which we have already addressed, this argument does have some of its own difficulties. For example, Camus suggests that the recognition of meaningfulness of other lives leads to solidarity, and this doesn't necessarily follow. It may be that instead we simply accept the value of human life abstractly, rather than be moved to feel a sense of solidarity to others, that is, this recognition may only be propositional. However, if we remember what was said in the previous section about the power of literature to encourage empathy, this becomes much less of a problem for a writer such as Camus who endeavoured to manifest all his philosophy in literary form.[16] In his philosophical literature, Camus taps into this latent force which is present in all literature, though it often lies dormant, and thus we are not *persuaded* of moral conclusions (such as solidarity), as you might be (propositionally) with a philosophical text. Instead, imaginative engagement makes Camus' argument (that recognition of the value of others leads to solidarity) true performatively. Of course, he can only *argue* for this in his philosophical essays, and we might be persuaded to accept it, but it is only true really when we experience it for ourselves. It is for this reason that I suggest that Camus ethics is necessarily founded on imaginative engagement with literature—literary style becomes philosophical style, as the content is

indivisible from form. As he put it himself, 'If you want to be a philosopher, write novels' (Camus 2006, II: 800).[17]

Camus himself reinforces this point in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, not only blurring the line between philosophy and literature (in this case novels), but also imbuing literature with philosophical importance. He writes:

> The philosopher … is a creator. He has his characters, his symbols, and his secret action. He has his plot endings … The best [novels] carry with them their universe. The novel has its logic, its reasonings, its intuition, and its postulates. It also has requirements of clarity … The great novelists are philosophical novelists. (Camus 2005, 96–97)

So, according to Camus, not only is the philosopher a creator, any novelist worth his salt is also a philosopher. We might suggest that Camus himself demonstrates both of these claims in his own works, not only through the distinctive style of his philosophical texts, but also in his literary achievements. But Camus provides his own examples; these 'great novelists' include the likes of 'Balzac, Sade, Melville, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Proust, Malraux [and] Kafka' (Camus 2005, 97–98). Camus explains that:

> The preference that they have shown for writing in images rather than in reasoned arguments is revelatory of a certain thought that is common to them all, convinced of the uselessness of any principle of explanation and sure of the educative message of perceptible appearance. They consider the work of art both as an end and as a beginning. It is the outcome of an often unexpressed philosophy, its illustration and its consummation. But it is complete only through the implications of that philosophy. It justifies at last that variant of an old theme that a little thought estranges from life whereas much thought reconciles to life (Camus 2005, 98).

This 'educative message of perceptible appearance' is the kind of moral growth that Camus believes fiction can offer. The 'unexpressed philosophy' of a work of fiction is the ideas that (without necessarily being conscious of it) we are brought to reflect upon by the text. For Camus, philosophical texts often rely too wholly on 'principle[s] of explanation' which 'estrange' us from life—such explanations are not conducive to the

type of philosophical reflection Camus wants to achieve, a comprehension which 'reconciles to life'.

On numerous occasions Camus himself levied strong criticisms against the abstractions of philosophy and its reliance on pure reason. In *L'Homme révolté*, he writes, 'The unity of pure reason is false' (Camus 2000, 234), and scathingly spoke of 'the religion of reason' (Camus 2000, 92). He suggested that rationalist philosophy, when not tempered by feeling, was entirely corruptible, convinced that 'philosophy, which can be used for anything, even transferring murderers into judges' (Camus 2000, 11) and could lead us to commit 'crimes of logic' (Camus 2000, 11). More than in any other sphere of philosophy, Camus thought that ethics was particularly poorly addressed when dealt with by the powers of reason alone. As Bronner suggested, 'Camus is concerned with breaking the stranglehold of rationalist ethics in the name of morality and lived experience' (Bronner 1999, 44).

Camus' creative works also comment on the dissonance between the incomprehensibility of the human condition and philosophy's application of rational language. A particularly crisp example of this is found in the words of his fellow journalist, Rambert, in *La Peste*, as he tries to justify his willingness to leave the quarantined city in order to be with his lover despite the risk of transmitting the infection to both her and the rest of the outside world: '"No," Rambert said bitterly. "You cannot understand. You are talking the language of reason, you are thinking in abstract terms"'. This is more than just metaphilosophising, however, it is performative; in experiencing this character's plight for ourselves via the text, we are much more able to comprehend (and therefore sympathise with) his suffering, and consequently are more likely to forgive his impulsive selfishness. As readers, we too 'want … with all [our] strength for Rambert to be back with his woman and for all those who loved one another to be reunited' (Camus 2002, 68), and here Camus is both commenting on philosophical form and encouraging philosophical reflection. Rambert continues to morally grow and develop throughout the novel, most notably through his dialogues with Rieux (such uses of philosophical dialogue to encourage moral growth will be the subject of Chap. 5).

While many careless readers of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* see the essay as a work of existentialist philosophy, biographer Olivier Todd suggests:

> This essay seems more about morality than philosophy. And more about morality than about ethics, if morality aims at establishing rules for living, whereas ethics strives to analyse the concepts of morality, perhaps eventually a morality to be founded outside the one imposed by moral judgements, based for example in God or transcendent reason … As a writer, busy with the relations between aesthetics and ethics, he did not want to propose any universal morality. It was difficult enough to construct one's own moral code. (Todd 1996, 293)[18]

While I would agree with Todd that Camus' primary preoccupation is with the possibility of a morality which is grounded in the everyday, curiously Camus sometimes explicitly railed against the idea of morality itself, writing in his notebooks in 1959, 'I've abandoned the moral point of view. Morality leads to abstraction and injustice' (Camus 2006, IV: 1298).[19] On closer inspection, however, it is clear that once again, he is not accepting any kind of moral nihilism, but simply restating his belief that reason must always be tempered by the emotions. As Eve Morisi writes:

> Albert Camus was at the same time profoundly sensitive to the existence of morality and critical with regard to this notion. He rejected certain definitions, traditions and practices of morality: those of Morality with a capital 'm', we might say. Morality 'kills' and 'devours' in Camus' eyes, when it is formalised, dogmatic, abstract or blindly ambitious. It can, in such cases, lead us astray—to ignore, for example, the particularities and complexities of history and of individuals. (Morisi 2014, 9)[20]

In his words, 'The irrational imposes limits on the rational which, in its turn, gives it moderation' (Camus 2000, 259). Elsewhere he writes, 'Philosophers are rarely read with the head alone, but often with the heart and all its passions which can accept no kind of reconciliation' (Camus 2000, 105)—in other words, the reader, and the everyday moral agent, is not guilty of such abstractions. Eve Morisi uses the term *souci* to describe the kind of ethical approach towards others that Camus advocates. The word *souci* in French is often translated as 'worry' or 'concern', but Morisi

explicitly uses it as equivalent to the English word 'care'. According to Morisi, this is what Camus wants us to have for others—this is not abstract moral duty, simply a way of approaching our fellow human beings with care (Morisi 2013, 29–31). In practice, humans have a keener sense of morality than can be achieved through the study of ethics, which explains the following often misquoted claim from Camus: 'In truth, what little of morality I know, I learned on the football pitches and theatre stages that remain to this day my true universities' (Camus 2006, IV: 830–831).[21] And so we see that, according to Camus, it is only through human interaction, and through artistic representation of human interaction, that we have any real hope of learning something about ethics.

For Camus, the very purpose of art itself is something ethical. He wrote in his notebooks, 'Justification for art: the true work of art aids sincerity, reinforces the complicity of human beings' (Camus 2006, II: 1017),[22] and elsewhere, that art is 'a means of moving the greatest number of people by giving them a privileged view of common suffering and joy' (Camus 2006, IV: 240).[23] Above all other art forms, Camus saw literature as the most suitable method of approaching ethics:

> Our true moralists … haven't legislated, they have painted. And by that they have done more to illuminate the conduct of humans than if they had patiently polished some definitive formulas that were dedicated to undergraduate dissertations. Only the novel is faithful to the particular. Its subject is not the conclusions of life, but its very unfolding. (Camus 2006, I: 924)[24]

As Sanson writes, Camus 'never disassociated the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of writing' (Sanson 2014, 165).[25]

We have already discussed at great length the possible reasons why literature can be so effective in provoking ethical reflection—both features of the works themselves and also the ways in which we approach and respond to works of art. Naturally, it is within this theoretical context that this book aims to demonstrate Camus' own contribution to ethics via literary techniques. While scholarship in the English language has all but overlooked Camus' contribution to ethics, in French Camus scholarship certain attentive readers have begun to comment on Camus' literary

ethics. In his 2014 essay, 'L'œuvre camusienne, un miroir éthique et existentiel', Alexis Lager writes:

> Camus' work is a mirror because the experience of the author is also that of the reader, that of each and every one. The *I* of the character gives birth to the *I* of the reader, and this dynamic gives rise to a *we*. From the ethical springboard that is Camus' œuvre, the singular gives birth to the universal. (Lager 2014, 213)[26]

This is precisely the effect which was discussed earlier in this chapter. In encountering the Other, via the text, the reader is brought to reflect upon her own moral life—or as Lager put it, 'The discovery of the self occurs via the experience of those *others* that are the characters, and in which the reader does not cease to interrogate themselves' (Lager 2014, 214).[27]

Despite how out of place Camus' philosophical methods might seem to the contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosopher, as we saw earlier in this section, he is certainly not alone in the wider context of the history of philosophy. From Plato's dialogues on goodness, to Nietzsche's literary exploration of the 'eternal return' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 1974), Camus' literary philosophy has an incredibly rich lineage. The immediate philosophical climate Camus was writing in was also very different from our own. For example, preceding Camus' own ventures (and no doubt in part inspiring them) were the literary endeavours of Jean-Paul Sartre. In many respects, Sartre set the tone in French philosophy of the period, and Camus was spurred on by his example in both content and form. But what inspired Camus most of all about Sartre, perhaps, was where he thought Sartre had gone wrong. Camus' critique of existentialism is central to his own philosophical innovations (as discussed in Chap. 4), but Camus' early engagement with Sartre's philosophical novel *La Nausée* seems to have helped him to formulate his own conception of the role of philosophy in literature, precisely by what Sartre (in his view) didn't quite achieve.

In his 1938 review of *La Nausée*, Camus wrote that:

> A novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images. And in a good novel, all the philosophy has passed into the images. But if it overflows the

> characters and action, the philosophy looks like a label stuck on the work, the plot loses its authenticity and the novel its life. Nevertheless, an enduring work cannot dispense with profound ideas. And this secret fusion of experience and ideas, between life and reflection on its meaning, is what makes the great novelist. (Camus 2006, I: 794)[28]

In other words, the novel must always retain its integrity as a work of art if it is to be successful in bringing about the kind of open reflection Camus wanted to achieve. The philosophical ideas behind any novel (or other form if literature) should therefore not dominate the text, and the author must not enforce her stance abstractly or dogmatically—this is where *La Nausée* was unsuccessful, according to Camus. Camus' theory of art is therefore imbued with a sense of philosophical humility. He writes in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*:

> Let there be no mistake in aesthetics. It is not a patient inquiry, the unceasing, sterile illustration of a book that I am calling for here. Quite the contrary, if I have made myself clearly understood. The book-novel, the work that proves the most hateful of all, is the one that most often is inspired by a *smug* thought. You demonstrate the truth you feel sure of possessing. But those are ideas one launches, and ideas are the contrary of thought. Those creators are philosophers, ashamed of themselves. (Camus 2005, 112)

Meanwhile, fiction must not 'forsake its initial and difficult lesson in favour of a final illusion' (Camus 2005, 99), the author must not be swept away by the desire for unity or beauty and abandon the philosophical ideas which drive this creation.

This kind of synthesis is something that Camus strove for throughout his entire œuvre—the ethical and the aesthetic being distinct, yet inseparable, from his perspective. Harkening back to Jon Stewart's ideas on the relationship between philosophical form and content, Bronner writes:

> With Camus, the ethical interest always permeates the way in which it is expressed. The form is inextricably interwoven with content, and his works illustrates an obsession with the *craft* of writing. Camus trespasses the boundaries between art, politics, and philosophy, even while leaving them intact. He provides his readers, in the most basic sense, with a *literature of moral deliberation*. (Bronner 1999, xii)

In the following section we will see some evidence of Camus' own personal struggle for this synthesis of the ethical and the aesthetic, as well as the extent of the craftsmanship behind his works.

5 Camus' Struggles with Rhetorical Form

In his early days as a writer, Camus gravitated towards journalism in the hope of communicating his ethical concerns. He wrote for and edited several newspapers and magazines throughout his life (including the *Alger Républicain*, *Paris Soir*, *L'Express*, and *Combat*),[29] often favouring the exposition of social injustice, not only during the Nazi Occupation of France during the Second World War, but also in defence of the oppressed Berber and Arabic communities of his native Algeria (Parker 1966, 21). As a journalist Camus experimented with style as much as in any of his other endeavours. As one critic writes:

> Camus's *Combat* editorials are a workshop, a place where moral didacticism and homily are mixed with query and call to reconsideration, where utopianism struggles against fatigue at the hard realities, where both the high-flying rhetoric of the barricades and the hard-hitting rhetoric of ideology critique were tethered by tragic lament (Young-Bruehl 1991, xv).

Thus, Camus discovered first-hand the difficulties entailed in any attempt to communicate the experiences of others. Another commentator writes:

> Camus was among the least systematic of thinkers. The evolution of his thought was rarely a logical or highly cerebral process. Rather, his ideas developed according to his visceral reactions to his experiences and observations. This is why Camus' journalism, in which he recorded and commented on what he believed to be the most important events of his day, provides so many insights into the rest of his work. The *Combat* writings, especially, both in the events they discuss and the hopes and aspirations they reveal, represent an extremely important phase in the development of Camus' thinking. (Gramont 1991, 5)

In encountering the barriers of propaganda, and no less, the restrictive, clichéd language of the media, he was unconvinced of the ability of newsprint to convey authentic messages. This dissatisfaction is illustrated from the perspective of Dr Rieux in *La Peste*, in whom Camus is 'present, barely disguised' according to his leading biographer, Olivier Todd (1996, 330):[30]

> Every evening on the airwaves or in the press, pitying or admiring comments rained down on this solitary town; and every time, the doctor was irritated by the epic note or tone of a prize-giving address. Of course he knew that the concern was genuine, but it could only express itself in the conventional language in which men try to explain what unites them with the rest of humanity. Such language could not be applied to the little, daily efforts of Grand, for example, and could not describe Grand's significance in the midst of the plague. (Camus 2002, 105–106)

Here we can see that the language of the press lacks a certain resonance; torn between the difficulty entailed in trying to communicate 'genuine' concern for individual suffering, and a reliance on truth claims which is the theoretical foundation of journalism, 'the most authentic sufferings [are] habitually translated into the banal clichés of conversation' (Camus 2002, 60). As Camus once wrote in *Combat*, 'It may take a hundred issues of a newspaper to express a single idea' (Camus 1991, 61). For Camus, the kind of truth which is so difficult to express in journalism is philosophical, moral and existential, but how best to propagate this kind of reflection is something which the young Camus had difficulty settling on.

Elsewhere in *La Peste*, Camus exposes his own personal struggle with choosing the right words. Fellow writer, Grand, struggles never-endingly with the opening line of his text, one of many variations of which is, 'On a fine May morning, a slender woman was riding a magnificent sorrel mare through the flowered avenues of the Bois de Boulogne' (Camus 2002, 103–104). But Grand is never satisfied that he has chosen the most appropriate words to share the image which he pictures so clearly and makes endless synonymous substitutions. He feels unable to convey his own subjective (in this case aesthetic) experiences. As he replaces words,

he feels he has lost nuance or signification and is repeatedly thwarted by his venture. According to Olivier Todd, Camus 'made fun of himself in his self-portrait as the pathetic Grand, who agonizes over writing a book. Grand keeps rewriting the same sentence, and Camus was on his third version of *La Peste*' (Todd 1996, 330).[31] This anxiety towards the adequacy of words is something that Camus, like many writers, spent a great deal of his career confronting.

The first novel that Camus completed was *La Mort heureuse*, though he was never satisfied that it conveyed his ideas well enough to have it published, doubting 'whether [he would] be able to realise the world that live[d] inside [him]'.[32] This novel provides an important insight into the formulation and development of Camus' later works, however 'clumsy and stiff'[33] he thought its style to be. As one critic writes:

> From a literary point of view, [*La Mort heureuse*] is immature. The dialogue is artificial, reading more like a series of philosophical monologues than a natural flow of conversation. But it is for this very reason that *La Mort heureuse* is extremely interesting, for the thinking 'behind' the fiction is in fact barely concealed at all; conversely, we might say that we can see here a Camus in transition, searching for a vehicle better suited to his thought than the academic prose of the book (Rathbone 2017, 126).

As Camus developed the material from this abandoned novel into *L'Etranger*, he consulted Malraux (a writer whom he greatly admired) on matters of style. His personal correspondences from this period reveal further trials with stylistics. In writing *L'Etranger*, Camus had 'sought for dryness in exposition',[34] but Malraux commented that Camus' 'sentences are a bit too systematically made up of subject, verb, complement, period. Sometimes it becomes a formula. Very easy to fix, by sometimes changing the punctuation'.[35] But as Camus revealed himself, 'Meursault always limits himself to answering questions … Thus he never affirms anything … Nothing can help you to see his deeply held convictions'.[36] In *L'Etranger*, Camus laboured for a style which, whilst granting the reader behind-the-scenes access to the mind of the protagonist, also requires us

to engage semantically and philosophically in order to understand his interactions with the rest of the world. The intricacy of the style of this novel will be returned to in Chap. 3.

While it is no doubt true that most writers struggle with the development of their own style, we know that with Camus, this anxiety is not simply motivated by aesthetic concerns; Camus believes that literary form is the best vehicle for philosophical ideas, so finding the best way of communicating those ideas is paramount to his concern as a writer. Camus' earliest published philosophical essay is *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, which attempts to address the problems which most concerned Camus—morality, mortality, and meaning. Camus struggled equally with this work, confessing in a personal correspondence:

> Since yesterday I have been full of doubt. Last night I started to write my essay about the absurd … It must be written, from beginning to end, and everything must fit into one work, which is what I started to do yesterday, and after half an hour, everything fell apart. I wrote two pages which are puerile, compared to what I really think. I was not seeing clearly, and got lost in details. I stopped short, and suddenly thought maybe I'm not capable of writing this, since anyone can have ideas, but to make them fit into a work and to master them creatively is what makes a writer … It needs total transparency to fully succeed.[37]

By this time, Camus had already been working on his essay for two years (Todd 1996, 221), so it is not entirely surprising that even the finished piece shows signs of his difficulty with integrating ideas and creativity.

Indeed, this early uncertainty is no doubt what prompted Camus to approach philosophical problems from multiple stylistic angles. Camus wrote in cycles; the 'Sisyphus' cycle, comprised of two plays (*Caligula* and *Le Malentendu*), a philosophical essay (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), and a novel (*L'Etranger*); the 'Prometheus' cycle, again including a novel (*La Peste*), a philosophical essay (*L'Homme révolté*) and two plays (*Les Justes* and *L'Etat de siège*); and unfinished at the time of his death, the 'Nemesis' cycle, in which he planned to include a novel (*Le Premier Homme*, which was published posthumously in its decidedly unpolished form), a play (*Don*

Faust) and an essay (*Le Mythe de Némésis*).[38] In the first cycle of his writing, Camus envisaged 'several parts with each section embodied with different techniques, and their results illustrate the consequences of an absurd grappling with life'.[39] During this period he was working on the idea that, as he put it, 'Certain works can illustrate one another',[40] approaching the problem of the absurd via multiple media. The themes he addresses in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* echo those that readers of *L'Etranger* come to contemplate via different means:

> In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled. It escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death. It is, at the extreme limit of the condemned man's last thought, that shoelace that despite everything he sees a few yards away, on the very brink of his dizzying fall. The contrary of suicide, in fact, is the man condemned to death. (Camus 2005, 52–53)

This contemplation of the absurd, mortality, and the death penalty permeates these works—and both literary and philosophical texts are intended to bring about reflection on the same philosophical problems. In 1943, Sartre commented on this decision to communicate his ideas in a kind of 'parallel text'. He writes, 'The very fact that Camus delivers his message in the form of a novel [is] … an outraged acknowledgement of the limitation of human thought', hinting again at Camus' dissatisfaction with pure reason. Sartre continues, 'It is true that he felt obliged to make a philosophical translation of his fictional message. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is precisely that' (Sartre 2007, 80). Sartre seems to imply here that even in writing a philosophical essay alongside *L'Etranger*, Camus is revealing his own uncertainty with philosophical methodology; dissatisfied with reason alone, and convinced of the power of literature to help us engage with philosophy, he nevertheless struggled with style and doubted his own ability.

Despite his essays acting as a kind of philosophical translation, they are nevertheless heavily reliant on metaphor and imagery: phrases such as 'under a cruel sky' (Camus 2002, 79). or 'with knives in our hand and lumps in our throats' (Camus 2002, 15) are powerful even isolated from

his arguments, and they certainly do bring a kind of literariness to his philosophical form—as indeed the use of the myth of Sisyphus to illustrate absurdity and defiance is an unusual philosophical device (Camus' use of myths and allegories will be returned to later, as this is the main focus of Chap. 4). *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* is written chiefly in the first person, comprised of philosophical observations inspired by Camus' own experiences, but episodes based on his own story are minimal and brief. Instead, Camus draws extensively on literary references (including characters such as Don Juan, Don Quixote, King Lear, and of course, Sisyphus himself)—references which bring to mind stories and characters so well-crafted and well-known that readers of this philosophical treatise are often transported to the original contexts of these characters, a space where aesthetic and empathetic appreciation take precedence.

6 Chapter Conclusion

Camus once wrote in his notebooks, 'Why is it that I am an artist and not a philosopher? It's because I think according to words and not according to ideas' (Camus 2006, II: 1029).[41] Whilst I am reluctant to argue that Camus is wrong about himself, I think that this quote sums up nicely the problem that I will be addressing throughout this book. The numerous theorists that I have drawn on already who hope to re-evaluate the distinction between philosophical and literary registers would no doubt agree that Camus' works represent exactly the kind of alternative approach to philosophical style and substance which they advocate. Thomas Hanna writes, 'It is the moral philosophy which underlies these novels and plays that gives them their force and desperation, and it is only in terms of this larger philosophical position that the literary works of Camus can be fully understood' (Hanna 1956, 232). I suggest that the reverse is also true—only through a thorough examination of Camus' literary methods can we truly appreciate Camus' contribution to moral philosophy; here lies the aim of this book.

Over the course of this volume, I will therefore examine and analyse Camus' specific strategies for 'doing moral philosophy'. Camus utilises diverse rhetorical and stylistic techniques in his philosophical and literary

works, all of which are designed to elicit philosophical and moral reflection on the part of the reader. These techniques include philosophical dialogues, classical myths, fables, and even innovative uses of grammatical structures, and while I do not mean to suggest that Camus has hit on one specific superior method of philosophising, I do aim to demonstrate his innovativeness as a moral philosopher—something which has been all but overlooked until now.

7 Chapter Summary

The remainder of the book will be developed across seven further chapters. Each chapter targets a specific issue, but all share a general form, oscillating between theoretical analyses and case studies of Camus' own arguments and practice. My aim is to thereby not only theorise but demonstrate how Camus' work conceptually enriches contemporary ethics. In many cases, readers will notice that I draw on numerous insightful works from early scholarship on Camus (such as Cruickshank 1957, or Slochower 1948). It should be noted that this decision represents the huge rift that has developed within Camus scholarship; there was a time when 'Camus the Philosopher' was taken seriously in academia, but sadly those days are long gone. While there are a few exceptions to this rule (e.g. Lévi-Valensi 1997; Srigley 2011), Camus is these days much neglected in philosophical circles, and so it is often necessary to return to these older, yet still relevant studies of Camus to overcome this fact. Naturally, this volume hopes to go some way in rectifying this dearth, as it is high time that philosophical Camus scholarship had its *renaissance*.

Chapter 2 addresses Camus' response to Christianity and the problem of suffering in the context of the early twentieth century. Due to his association with the existentialism movement, it is often assumed that Camus, like many other French intellectuals of the period, rejected Christianity altogether. For this reason, his sympathy with Christian thought is overlooked, and it seems altogether bizarre that some theologians even claimed Camus to be a convert. Among these wildly conflicting claims, Camus' philosophical response to Christianity has become somewhat muddied; in this chapter I attempt to rectify this. I argue that Camus'

entire philosophy is underpinned by his response to Christianity, and that he wanted to re-establish the position of morality in the face of the problem of suffering. I thus demonstrate how his writings manifest his struggle to achieve this goal. Camus once claimed, 'I do not believe in God *and* I am not an atheist'. This chapter aims to elucidate just what is meant by a statement like this, as well as to catalogue and analyse Camus' innovative attempts at reconciling spirituality and suffering through philosophical literature.

In Chap. 3 I examine the effect of the minimalist writing style used in *L'Etranger*, arguing that this novel gains its ability to bring about intersubjective experiences of Meursault, based on its direct, clear, and unmediated language. I suggest that the simplicity of certain writing styles suspends particular types of aesthetic judgements, instead allowing moral and personal features of the character to become more salient. I suggest that this technique was inspired by the authors of 'Great American Novel' (such as Hemingway, among others) whose writing aims for acuteness and purity—a claim I go on to illustrate with textual case studies. Where Camus differs, I argue, is that his style is always underpinned by his philosophical goals. Here I also examine French grammatical elements of the style of the novel which are overlooked in Anglophone Camus scholarship.

In Chap. 4, I examine the use of what I call 'metaphorical' techniques (myth, fable, allegory, and parable) in the philosophical and literary works of Camus. Drawing on theoretical work from Lacoue-Labarthe's *The Subject of Philosophy*, I argue that philosophy is bound by style, and as such, works which embrace the ambiguities of their medium are perhaps a more appropriate method of approaching the uncertainties of lived experience than contemporary analytic methods. I offer a detailed analysis of Camus' own attempts—including myth in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, *La Peste* as fable, or *Le Renégat* as an allegory for a philosophical critique, among others.

Following Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Chap. 5 examines the function of dialogue in the novels of Camus, presenting him as an heir to Dostoevsky's dialogic approach to philosophical problems. I introduce my own concept of 'dialogic ethics', referring to a method of moral problem solving which I identify as being present in the novels of both authors. I suggest that by engaging imaginatively with the

characters of novels as moral agents, dialogue gives us the opportunity to recalibrate our responses to the beliefs of others, opening ourselves up before evaluative points of view that we would otherwise have good reason to resist. I therefore argue that dialogue in Camus' novels (and Dostoevsky's) presents an alternative yet effective approach to abstract moral reasoning.

Chapter 6 examines a strand in twentieth-century literature which certainly takes up Camus' mantle in terms of 'doing moral philosophy' by creative means—that is, the movement known as the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. This term was coined by Martin Esslin in his 1961 essay of the same name, and it is used to refer to the stylistic innovations of a number of artists (including Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Adamov and Genet) who, according to Esslin, have 'renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; [their work] merely *presents* it in being'. Numerous scholars (including Esslin, Serreau and Lupo) have suggested that, despite Camus himself having written several plays which attempt to communicate the absurd, his theatre exhibits none of the radical experimentation with form that the Theatre of the Absurd does. I suggest that this analysis doesn't entirely do Camus justice, and thus I attempt to show in this chapter that Camus' theatre contains germinal elements of the methods that Esslin attributes to absurd theatre, examining the three short plays-within-a-play in *Caligula* as pieces of absurd theatre in their own right.

In Chap. 7, I continue to demonstrate that the world of literature has to some extent succeeded in taking up Camus' mantle, this time by examining the novel *Meursault, contre-enquête*, written by Kamel Daoud, another important successor to Camus. Here I borrow Eleonore Stump's concept of 'Franciscan knowledge' as presented in *Wandering in Darkness* (2010). *Meursault, contre-enquête* is written from the perspective of Harun, the brother of the dead 'Arab' from *L'Etranger*. An important feature to note is that in the world of *Meursault, contre-enquête*, both the character Meursault and the novel *L'Etranger* exist (though referred to under an alternative title, *L'Autre*), and through reading *L'Etranger*, Harun comes to know his enemy, becoming accepting of Meursault as a subject, and acknowledging his own similarities. While *Meursault, contre-enquête* is framed around issues relating to postcolonial identity, I suggest that Daoud has borrowed something important from Camus' own methods,

and that what Harun and readers in general gain from encounters with novels is Franciscan knowledge, and intersubjective knowledge of characters, and thus, others.

In the short concluding chapter of this book, I look back on the issues approached by the preceding chapters, suggesting that contemporary ethical theory would benefit greatly from a diversification in method, and that much can be learned from Camus' own attempts. For millennia authors have dealt with ethical matters via literary means, and it is a very recent development in the history of philosophy that we have come to only take seriously works which apply 'analytic' methods. Morality is in its essence messy, and therefore it requires an approach which doesn't aim to tidy it up—making clear-cut examples that can be dissected and analysed. Camus is by no means the only theorist to have a problem with the application of abstract reasoning to morality, but he has come a long way in developing a method which is more sensitive to the matter at hand.

Notes

1. In French: 'Si être philosophe, c'est pour poser toutes ces questions, non sous forme théorique, abstraite, conceptuelle, mais … à travers des personnages qui refusent d'être des surhommes, à travers des aventures qui se jouent dans la quotidienneté de la vie réelle, alors, oui, Camus, dans ses romans comme dans ses essais, a été philosophe.'
2. A colleague from the White Rose Aesthetics Forum, Dr Aaron Meskin, drolly suggested I entitle this book 'Camus for Grown-ups', highlighting how little this philosopher is taken seriously in the current climate.
3. Of course, Camus' literary stylings are still innovative in literary terms, but they aren't nearly as radical, we might say, as the likes of Joyce or Breton. But what is radical about Camus is his free use of creative methods in communicating philosophical ideas, as opposed to the literary stylings themselves, innovative as they are.
4. This is of course not a categorical judgement; certainly some analytic philosophers recognise the necessity of addressing moral ambiguity (e.g. Hampshire 1991; Foot 2002; MacIntyre 2007; Murdoch 2013). Rather, I point this out in order to illuminate the context of Camus' critique of philosophical abstractions.

5. Including Beardsmore 1972; Carroll 2002; Diamond 1982; Hamilton 2003; John 1998; Landy 2008; Nussbaum 1983; Palmer 1992; Raphael 1983; and Skilleås 2001.
6. It is important to acknowledge that Nussbaum has quite different projects in *Love's Knowledge* and *Poetic Justice*. In *Love's Knowledge* she promotes the use of novels (notably those of Henry James) as a necessary supplement to moral philosophy. In *Poetic Justice* she promotes the use of novels (e.g. those of Dickens) as elements of a moral education, aimed especially at law students. Posner has different arguments against the two projects. Against the *Love's Knowledge* project he argues that her readings of James are reductive and that other possible readings wouldn't serve the ends of moral philosophy at all (these arguments, being aimed solely at her reading of James, are not particularly relevant to the aims of this book—although the issue of different readings and interpretations of the works discussed in this book will necessarily come up again throughout). Against the *Poetic Justice* project, he uses the above arguments to the effect that most literary works are useless at making people better, more moral, citizens. While this book is not concerned with the kind of moral education that law practitioners require, some of Nussbaum's claims in *Poetic Justice* are certainly relevant to the current project because Camus is not only concerned with the idea that novels could contribute to moral philosophy (as Nussbaum argues in *Love's Knowledge*), but also that people might become better citizens (i.e. more morally reflective people) by reading novels (which is Nussbaum's primary concern in *Poetic Justice*).
7. Eaton argues precisely this in her paper 'Robust Immoralism' (Eaton 2012).
8. For a discussion of the kind of knowledge this might be, see Chap. 7.
9. Or to use Eaton's examples, Hannibal Lecter from the novels of Thomas Harris, or Humbert Humbert from Nabokov's *Lolita* (Eaton 2012, 281–292).
10. While Camus isn't mentioned in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams nevertheless uses a quote from *La Chute* as an epigraph: 'Quand on n'a pas de caractère, il faut bien se donner une méthode', which translates as 'When you don't have character, you'd better get yourself a method' (Williams 1983, xviii). Williams' choice of quote, which seems to be directed at contemporary ethics' over reliance on method, illuminates the relevance of Camus and his vision of the role of character—both fictional and moral.
11. Strawson's translation.

12. In spite of the importance Goldie bestows future-directed narratives (see Goldie 2014).
13. In French: 'Ça, c'est le point de départ. Mais Camus n'adopte pas l'absurde. Il décrit l'absurde. … Camus se contente de décrire l'absurde pour voir comment on peut en sortir.' (my translation).
14. Letter from André Malraux, 30 October 1941 (in Todd 1996, 282; translation from Todd 1998, 134).
15. In French, 'Je me révolte, donc nous sommes' (my translation).
16. To claim that Camus manifested *all* his philosophical content in literary form may at first seem like somewhat of an exaggeration. However, if we consider that his two most substantial philosophical essays were each part of 'cycles' of writing which also encompass multiple literary works on the same themes, this immediately becomes more plausible. The matter of these 'cycles' will be returned to later on in this chapter.
17. In French, 'Si tu veux être philosophe, écris des romans' (my translation).
18. Translation from Todd 1998, 142–143.
19. In French, 'J'ai abandonné le point de vue morale. La morale mène à l'abstraction et à l'injustice' (my translation).
20. In French, 'Albert Camus était à la fois profondément sensible à l'existence d'une morale et critique à l'égard de cette notion. Il en rejetait certaines définition, tradition et pratique: celles de la Morale pourvue d'une majuscule, pourrait-on dire. La Morale 'tue', 'dévore', aux yeux de Camus, quand elle est formelle, dogmatique, abstraite, ou aveuglément ambitieuse. Elle peut, en ce cas, conduire à faire fausse route—à ignorer, par exemple, les particularités et complexités de l'histoire et des individus.' (my translation).
21. In French, 'Vraiment, le peu de morale que je sais, je l'ai appris sur les terrains de football et les scènes de théâtre qui resteront mes vraies universités.' (my translation).
22. In French, 'Justification de l'art: La véritable œuvre d'art aide à la sincérité, renforce la complicité des hommes' (my translation).
23. In French, 'un moyen d'émouvoir le plus grand nombre d'hommes en leur offrant une image privilégiée des souffrances et des joies communes' (my translation).
24. In French, 'Nos vrais moralistes … n'ont pas légiféré, ils ont peint. Et par là ils ont plus fait pour éclairer la conduite des hommes que s'ils avaient poli patiemment … une certaine de formules définitives, vouées aux dissertations de bacheliers. C'est que le roman seul est fidèle au particulier.

Son objet n'est pas les conclusions de la vie mais son déroulement même.' (my translation).

25. In French, '[Camus] n'a jamais dissocié les dimensions esthétique et éthique de l'écriture' (my translation).
26. In French, 'L'œuvre camusienne et un miroir parce que l'expérience de l'auteur est aussi bien celle du lecteur, celle de tout ou chacun. Du *je* des personnages naît le *je* du lecteur, et cette dynamique fait s'édifier un *nous*. A travers ce tremplin éthique qu'est l'œuvre camusienne, le singulier fait naître l'universel.' (my translation).
27. In French, 'la découverte de soi passe par l'expérience de ces *autres* que sont les personnages et dans lesquels chaque lecteur ne cesse de s'interroger.' (my translation).
28. In French, 'Un roman n'est jamais qu'une philosophie mise en images. Et dans un bon roman, toute la philosophie est passée dans les images. Mais il suffit qu'elle déborde les personnages et les actions, qu'elle apparaisse comme une étiquette sur l'œuvre, pour que l'intrigue perde son authenticité et le roman sa vie. Pourtant une œuvre durable ne peut se passer de pensée profonde. Et cette fusion secrète de l'expérience et de la pensée, de la vie et de la réflexion sur son sens, c'est elle qui fait le grand romancier'.
29. For further biographical information see Todd 1996.
30. Translation in Todd 1998, 133.
31. Translation in Todd 1998, 131.
32. As Camus wrote in a letter to Marguerite Dobrenn dated 17 August 1937 (translation Todd 1998, 65).
33. As he wrote in a letter to Jeanne Sicard on 2 August 1937 (translation in Todd 1998, 72).
34. As Camus wrote to his friend Pascal Pia on 2 June 1941 (translation in Todd 1998, 133).
35. Relayed to Camus by letter by Pia, dated 27 May 1941 (translation in Todd 1998, 131).
36. In an unsent letter to the critic Rousseaux, 1942 (translation in Todd 1998, 151–152).
37. Letter to Francine, 26 November 1939 (translation in Todd 1998, 92).
38. An entry in his notebooks reads 'The third cycle is love: Le Premier Homme, Don Faust, Le Mythe de Némésis' (Camus 2006, IV: 1245 in French, 'Le troisième étage, c'est l'amour: Le Premier Homme, Don Faust. Le Mythe de Némésis').

39. Letter to his friend Claude de Fréminville, undated (translation in Todd 1998, 105).
40. Letter to André Malraux, 15 November 1941 (translation in Todd 1998, 134).
41. In French, 'Pourquoi suis-je un artiste et non un philosophe? C'est que je pense selon les mots et non selon les idées' (my translation).

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2

A Post-Christian Ethics

1 Chapter Introduction

The magnitude of suffering experienced and witnessed in the first half of the twentieth century understandably led many people to re-evaluate their moral and spiritual position in the world, and consequently their faith also. No doubt for some, religious faith provided sufficient consolation, but many others rejected religion altogether, unable to accept that any theodicy could justify the immense pain and chaos around them. The art that the World Wars inspired naturally embodies the whole spectrum of spiritual responses to suffering and doubt, from the liturgy of T. S. Eliot's 'Ash-Wednesday' all the way to the desolation of Anselm Kiefer's 'Black Flakes', and everything in between. What is of interest to this chapter, however, is not to be found at either extreme, but somewhere in the middle. Albert Camus, being born in 1913 in predominately Catholic French Algeria, having lost his father in the First World War, and being an active member of the French Resistance, is an artist who was perfectly situated to feel the full force of this spiritual upheaval, and naturally this is manifested in his writings. Camus wanted to re-establish the position

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of morality in the face of the problem of suffering, and his writings manifest this struggle to do so. Camus once wrote in his notebooks, 'I do not believe in God *and* I am not an atheist' (Camus 2006c, IV: 1197).[1] I hope to elucidate just what is meant by a statement like this, and thus this chapter catalogues and analyses Camus' innovative attempts at renegotiating the relationship between spirituality and suffering through literature—an essential dimension to any reconstruction of Camusian ethics.[2]

So multifaceted was Camus' engagement with Christian thought that he is construed in Christian scholarship as everything from an avid atheist to a 'crypto-Christian'. I will therefore begin by unpacking some of these claims and attempting to give a firm account of Camus' complex stance with regard to Christianity, making reference both to his philosophical works, and the life that informed them (Sects. 2 and 3). Following on from this, I shall begin my investigation of Camus' creative approaches to theological and moral problems—not only the manifestation of his criticisms, but also his longing for spiritual coherence. Here I also formulate a notion of a kind of 'secular faith' which I attribute to Camus (Sects. 4 and 5). The subsequent section (Sect. 6) will take *La Chute* as an extended case study, as not only is this work particularly rich in Christian imagery, it also epitomises the spiritual conflict of mid-twentieth-century art.

2 Camus the Christian?

Albert Camus grew up in French Algeria in the early twentieth century, in the poor, working-class district of Belcourt, Algiers. While Catholicism was an important part of French society, the poorer classes generally only observed religion as a formality, the grandeur of the Church and its teachings seeming so very far from the mundane struggles of everyday life. In such an environment, Christianity represented little more to the Camus family than the ceremonial pomp of special occasions, and thus the moral and metaphysical aspects of religion did not always seem relevant to the young Albert, despite his being confirmed in a local church, and having received holy communion (Todd 1996, 33). But in spite of (and perhaps precisely because of) the indifference to religion in which Camus was

raised, as a young adult he became fascinated with early Christian thought, the distance from religion that his upbringing entailed allowing him to approach the philosophical side of Christianity, and evaluate it from the outside. This early interest in Christianity as philosophy inspired him to write his dissertation on Plotinus and Saint Augustine for the *Diplôme d'Études Supérieures*, which he submitted to the University of Algiers in 1936 (Camus 2006c, I: 999–1081). Religion had of course been a complicated issue in France ever since the country's 'dechristianisation' during the Revolution, but neither politicised *laïcité* nor existentialism's Nietzschean mantra of 'God is dead' would inspire anti-clericalism in Camus, and he continued to engage with Christian thought throughout the entirety of his career. As Matthew Sharpe put it, 'We will continually see' evidence that 'Camus' thought developed in continual, decisive dialogue with Catholic writers … [and] the Christian tradition' (Sharpe 2015, 102).

Of course, Camus' concern with religion comes not from a place of belief, but rather from a preoccupation with human finitude, and a yearning for meaning and coherence in the face of suffering and death. Nevertheless, his engagement with Christian thought is so extensive that interpretations of his stance vary tremendously. Despite his being a self-professed agnostic, many writers continue to refer to 'Camus' atheism' (e.g. Blackburn 2011, 315), while one critic, who refers to Camus as 'the lay saint', claims that while Camus was 'profoundly opposed to all Christianity stands for' (Peyre 1960, 23), he 'found himself posthumously serving as a theme for many sermons' (Peyre 1960, 20). Others have called him 'a religious thinker' and 'a religious moral philosopher' (Hanna 1956, 224), or suggested that 'Camus's apparently anti-religious thought' is marked as 'secretly religious' by the very fact he considers death to be a problem at all—apparently this proves that he 'works within the essentially religious apprehension that life, if it is to have meaning, must in some way be extended' (Wood 1999, 93). These supposed 'subterranean theological residues at work in Camus' own corpus' (Cristaudo 2011, 152), at the extreme, have even inspired several bizarre claims (for which there appears to be no real evidence) that Camus in fact converted to Christianity in secret. While Jean Sarrochi (a sometime respected Camus scholar) called him a 'crypto-Christian' (Gaetani 2017, 51), perhaps the

strangest of all comes from Protestant Minister Howard Mumma, who claims to have befriended and personally converted Camus. The tall tale goes like this:

> In 2000 a Methodist minister from Ohio by the name of Howard Mumma, then 90 years old, wrote a book entitled Albert Camus and the Minister. According to Mumma, Camus had been visiting the American Church in Paris to listen to organist Marcel Dupré, and during his attendance of the services he had become deeply interested in Mumma's sermons. After a few weeks he approached Mumma, and a friendship between the two men developed. According to Mumma, Camus had never really read the Bible before their meeting—Camus apparently had a Latin Bible, which he would on occasion consult to check a point, but he had not actually read it in its entirety. The Protestant Mumma then bought Camus a French translation as a gift, which he did read. As Mumma tells it, until that time, Camus had never thought of the Bible as a composition in which allegory, symbol, metaphor, and historical fact all weave seamlessly to convey insights about the relationship between God and man, which cannot simply be cashed out as empirical items. Mumma, in other words, showed Camus how to read the Bible like any well-educated theologian today. (Cristaudo 2011, 146)

While there is no evidence for the veracity of this story (and indeed the idea that Camus, an author so skilled at allegorical writing, had only previously considered literal interpretations of the Bible seems preposterous), it would be careless to hastily dismiss it as the wishful imagination of an old evangelist. The very idea that Camus converted to Christianity has serious implications—if the entirety of his thought was simply a journey towards conversion, this undermines his entire philosophy. Camus strove towards a moral philosophy that was not founded on religion, and such a change of heart would relegate his entire œuvre to a series of stepping stones. Gaetani puts it rather more harshly, saying, '*si Camus tombe, sa philosophie tombe avec lui*'—if Camus falls, his philosophy falls with him (Gaetani 2017, 60). Rather than dismiss this fanciful story as irrelevant, however, it would instead be prudent to investigate why it is that a Christian minister would even want Camus on his side.

3 'Dialogue Croyant-Incroyant'

Of course, most believers will attest that faith is not something constant and reassuring, despite what some atheists might assume. Believers experience times of doubt and uncertainty, and in fact these incidents are a necessary part of faith; even non-religious philosophers can identify with the need to question and investigate our assumptions in order to formulate better theories, and thus something resembling certainty. A philosopher like Camus, non-Christian though he may be, nevertheless spent a great deal of his career tackling the challenges of Christianity, and saw the value in dialogue between believers and non-believers (Camus 2006c, II: 471),[3] so it is easy to understand why Christians themselves would find engaging with his works a fruitful pursuit. In fact, there are undoubtedly several key areas of Camus' philosophy which respond directly to Christian thought; these include (but perhaps are not limited to) the faith/reason dichotomy, suffering, transcendence, and of course morality itself. Before demonstrating Camus' creative approach to such matters, it would be prudent to outline his philosophical responses. As we saw in the introductory chapter, the absurd, which Camus explains in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, signifies the incongruity between the human desire for meaning and order, and the chaos and indifference of the universe. Camus writes that 'The absurd is sin without God' (Camus 2005, 40), and by this he means that like original sin, humans are born with this curse: it is through no fault of our own, but we are condemned to strive for meaning in this finite existence. As Wood puts it, the absurd 'is the sentence passed on us by life' (Wood 1999, 94). This understanding of humanity's place in the universe is something that acts as a foundation for all of Camus' philosophy, and it is necessary to keep it in mind when considering his responses to Christianity.

In an insightful article, Daniel Berthold (2013) points out that the philosophies of Camus and Kierkegaard are in many ways more similar than they might at first appear. While Kierkegaard is very much a Christian philosopher, the picture of faith he presents is by no means one of quiet contentment, it is one of painful struggles in the face of obscurity and suffering (Kierkegaard 1974). Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety is also extremely close to Camus' concept of absurdity; both

illustrate the profound sense of isolation the human experiences facing our place in the universe. In turn, Camus certainly seems to have understood the struggle at the heart of faith, writing, 'I have the impression that faith is not so much a peace as a tragic hope' (Camus 2006c, II: 476)[4]—quite contrary to Hermet's suggestion that 'Christianity appeared to [Camus] as an illusion, at the same time as a consolation and a need at the age when our strength leaves us: it's a religion for old people' (Hermet 1976, 141).[5] As Wood put it, 'It is within this tradition of unstable belief that his thinking breathes its unbelief' (Wood 1999, 89). What is often overlooked, however, is the reverse effect, which is nevertheless true: Camus' work exhibits a certain kind of faithfulness. Camus' faith, however, is not in God, but in the Other[6]—in human nature—despite the doubt and suffering he saw all around him (but, exactly what this faith entails, I shall return to shortly). Camus' faith in human nature, and the rejection of pure reason it entails, can also be seen as a 'tragic hope' in the light of the World Wars.

While Camus' Masters dissertation is neither his most mature nor his developed response to Christianity, it does illustrate more clearly than anywhere else the kind of Christianity that he admired most. He writes, 'The dialogue of Faith and Reason is brought to light for the first time by Saint Augustine … Reason becomes more supple. It is illuminated by the light of Faith … It is not *about* God that you must believe, but *in* God' (Camus 2006c, I: 1073).[7] Camus, being interested in Christianity *as* philosophy, was content to blur this line between faith and reason. As such, the convergence between Greek and Christian thought that Camus describes in this text is perhaps more illuminating in terms of Camus' own thought than in the history of ideas—he writes:

> [Neoplatonism] is a perpetual effort to reconcile contradictory notions … Mystical Reason, sensitive Intelligence; immanent and transcendent God: the oppositions abound. However, they all mark a constant balance between the emotional and the intellectual, the religious aspect of the principles and their explicative power. In this dialogue of heart and Reason, truth can only express itself in images … pouring the intelligible into tangible form, giving to intuition that which belonged to Reason. (Camus 2006c, I: 1058–1059)[8]

Here and elsewhere many of the claims he makes about Plotinus and Augustine could just as easily be said of Camus himself, considering his reliance on metaphor and imagery in philosophical writing: he was without a doubt 'Greek in his need for coherence; Christian in the worries of his sensibility' (Camus 2006c, I: 1063).[9] When he writes that 'Plotinus describes intelligence in a sensual fashion. His reason is living, fleshed-out, and moving like a mixture of water and light' (Camus 2006c, I: 1042),[10] the style here is straight out of Camus' own lyrical essays, a pagan mixture of carnality and mysticism.

Camus describes what he sees as the Christian 'disdain for speculation', writing, 'It is to the children that the Kingdom of God is promised, but also to the savants who have known to give up their knowledge in order to understand the truth of the heart' (Camus 2006c, I: 1010).[11] While this would ordinarily seem like a harsh criticism coming from a philosopher, we know that Camus believed that reason is not the sole key to philosophical truth. As one critic writes:

> Camus rejects theories, reasonings, and abstractions as a whole … A personal ethic is born in the consideration of the other. Solidarity is revealed at the same time as it is felt … It's looking at the other as another self. It is to give it a face, a form, a limit, it is to register it perhaps first of all in the spheres of the carnally communicable (Abdelkrim 2006, 222–223).[12]

This is the kind of secular faith to which he aspires, which is why 'he proceeded less by purely abstract analysis than by personal engagement with problems that arose in the course of his life' (Royal 2014, 27–28). Camus' vision of ethics is therefore a kind of empathetic empiricism—we must feel before we truly know.

For the young Camus, another of the things that was so powerful about Christianity was its depiction of suffering and death—something which we all must face, according to him, on our quest of an authentic life in the face of the absurd. In his dissertation on early Christian thought (several years before he wrote *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), he writes:

> True Christians are those who have realised this triumph of the martyred flesh. Jesus being man, the whole stress had been put on his death: physically,

> we know of hardly anything more horrible. It is … the torn-up hands and cracked joints, that one should contemplate to imagine the terrifying image of torture that Christianity has made its symbol (Camus 2006c, I: 1007).[13]

He takes this contemplation of suffering to be central to Christian thought. For example, he recounts the story of a fourth-century bishop who predicts an impending apocalypse. According to Camus, the generation of Christians who believed in this prophecy represent a 'unique example of a collective experience of death'. Echoing the Heideggerian concept of 'being-towards-death' (Heidegger 2010), he argues that 'To realise the idea of death gives our life a new meaning' (Camus 2006c, I: 1007)[14]—this is a claim which is at the heart of his philosophy, and it is therefore clear that Camus would like to replicate this collective experience of death, in order for us to appreciate the gift of life while we still possess it.

But suffering does not only signify the catalyst for authenticity—it is also central to Camus' rejection of transcendence. While, according to Camus, contemplation of suffering and death is precisely what makes humans wish for an afterlife (Camus 2005, 32), it is also the reason we must reject this fantasy—we must never be reconciled to suffering, as to legitimise it would be unjust. The idea that an omnipotent God would allow the existence of so much suffering, therefore, is unacceptable to Camus, and entails what he refers to as 'metaphysical injustice' (Camus 2000b, 29–31). In a speech entitled 'The Unbeliever and the Christians' (Camus 2006c, II: 470),[15] which was addressed to a congregation at a Dominican monastery in 1946, Camus said, 'I share with you the same horror of evil. But I do not share your hope, and I continue to struggle against this universe in which children suffer and die' (Camus 2006c, II: 471).[16] This is exemplary of Camus' approach to the problem of suffering. Not only does he acknowledge the Christian moral response to suffering, he also suggests that for him, there could never be a sufficient theodicy. He considers human life to be sacred, and therefore the only solution is to fight against cruelty. From a theistic perspective, one might attribute meaning to the suffering itself, but from an agnostic perspective it would make more sense to accept that *life isn't fair*, and in fact the existence of God can feel irrelevant when we are truly touched by the

suffering of the Other. There is no solution to the problem of suffering, and thus this is agnosticism chosen on ethical grounds.

It is because of his approach to suffering and transcendence that Camus also rejects the legitimacy of political violence. If we think it just to commit murder in the name of an ideal (no matter how lofty), we believe that the ideal is somehow transcendent to human life. For Camus, the end never justifies the means—morality resides in every action, never a future goal which justifies immorality (Camus 2000b, 135). Truly virtuous motives therefore could never permit violence in the name of an ideal—nothing is worth causing human suffering. Camus, above all then, believed in the value of human life. He wanted to demonstrate the value of morality in a godless universe, and thus he had a 'yearning for a non-Christian concept of the sacred' (Rathbone 2017, 121). Unlike the existentialists, Camus rejected the idea of radical freedom. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, he writes, 'The absurd does not liberate, it binds. It does not authorise all actions. Everything is permitted does not mean that nothing is forbidden' (Camus 2005, 65). While he doesn't develop his moral philosophy fully until later in his career, it is clear from very early on that the lack of a guiding power should not mean the lack of morality. But as we saw in the previous chapter, for Camus, even moral theory is corruptible. As Cristaudo put it, Camus 'shares a deep affinity with the traditional Christian rejection of the idea of salvation through morality, and for much the same reason—that the concrete requirements of love cannot be compressed into a moral formulation' (Cristaudo 2011, 147). The kind of morality Camus wished for, then, was more holistic than this—something in fact much closer to the Christian ideal—Camus' ideal moral philosophy is one of concern for the Other, founded on empathy and understanding.

The unifying theme of Camus' third cycle of philosophy was to be, as he put it, 'love' (Royal 2014, 25). As he died before its completion, and left behind only a few vague, hand-written notes, we can hardly guess how his moral philosophy would have been developed in these works. From what he published in the years before, however, we can speculate on the role he envisaged the concept of love playing in moral philosophy. Rowan Williams, theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury, writes that 'At the heart of the desperate suffering there is in the world,

suffering we can do nothing to resolve or remove for good, there is an indestructible energy for love' (Williams 2007, 10). This is the essence of both Christian and Camusian ethics. Indeed, on many occasions, Camus spoke of love with regard to ethics. In *Combat*, the French Resistance newspaper that he wrote for and edited, he writes, 'Humanists have much in common with Christians: [Christians] are taught to love their neighbour. Yet others who do not share their faith may yet hope to arrive at the same goal' (Camus 2006a, 32). In his notebooks, he jotted down numerous notes about love, many harkening back to a Christian ideal. He writes, 'Whoever gives nothing has nothing. The greatest misfortune is not to be unloved, but not to love' (Camus 2006c, IV: 1136),[17] and 'Recognise the necessity of enemies. Love that they exist … Recover the greatest strength, not to dominate but to give. (Camus 2006c, IV: 1272).[18] While he was not alive long enough to properly develop a sustained account of his philosophical conception of love, we may speculate that Camus' ethics would have continued embody this focus on love as a kind of human solidarity, not abstracting from life, or upholding theoretical ideals, but responding to the Other with love and compassion (a conception of love which represents yet another philosophical difference which separates Camus from Sartre and the existentialists).

4 Faith in Nature

Having seen Camus' conceptual responses to Christianity on a number of themes, it is now time to look at his creative responses. I suggest that there are two distinct types of secular faith which are manifest in Camus' works, specifically faith in the world (nature) and faith in humanity (human nature). As has already been made clear in the previous section, the term 'faith' does not entail any kind of constant reassurance, but instead a hopeful effort to trust, for trust's own sake. Naturally there are differences between the kind of faith or trust we might have in a deity and any other kind, but I suggest that the kinds of faith that Camus' works exhibit (in the world and in humanity) add up to and compensate for the absence of religious faith. As we will see, the relief that a believer might experience in surrendering to the will of God is manifested instead in a

kind of communion with the universe which, comparable to a religious experience, depicts acceptance of death and trust in nature's order. Meanwhile, the experience of a personal relationship that believers may nourish through prayer comes instead from the praxis of cultivating comprehension and compassion (an ethical endeavour we can practise in the real world which, as I argue throughout this book, can also be facilitated by encounters with fiction). Camus' earlier works are most characterised by the representation of this faith in the world—a rejection of vertical transcendence in favour of horizontal. Conversely, in response to suffering witnessed in WWII, his later works are predominantly characterised by his insistence on the necessity of rebuilding faith in humanity, and a firm moral ground which circumvents abstraction. As we will see, each of these categories is replete with Christian imagery. As one critic puts it, 'Camus inverts all religious categories, in the process converting them out of their baleful literalism and into the metaphorical' (Wood 1999, 94). I will now attempt to demonstrate a movement in Camus' work which begins with the subversion of Christianity, but moves on towards the kind of faith in the world which was outlined above.

When Camus wrote in the preface to the English edition of *L'Etranger* that Meursault is 'the only Christ we deserve' (Camus 2000a, 119), this contentious comment reflects his subversive approach to religious imagery. Camus 'was drawn to the figure of Jesus Christ, because of Jesus' humanity, his humility, his suffering and his compassion for the suffering of others' (Blackburn 2011, 322), and while it would be farfetched to apply such a definition to Meursault, on further examination it does become clear that he represents a sort of inverted Christ, a misunderstood individual who is put to death by the masses. As Patrick writes:

> He is offered up as a tribal sacrificial victim, not to placate the whims of a revered god, but to insure the validity of the social structure … Neither attempts to save his life, for each knows that, by doing so, he would lose the validity of that life, its authenticity and its redeeming quality that are only sustained if they are maintained to the end. (Patrick 1975, 162)

Thus he is a martyr in a godless universe, which is characterised in numerous subtle allusions, such as how, on the day of Meursault's trial,

his friend Emmanuel fails to present himself in court to give evidence. Emmanuel, meaning 'God is with us' in Hebrew, a name which, at the hour of Meursault's[19] persecution, echoes not only, as Scherr writes, an 'existential "absent God"' (Scherr 2009, 197), but also the God whom Christ beseeches from the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

There are numerous other subtle moments of allusion to the figure of Christ—Meursault is even at one point depicted with a halo—he tells us, 'The chaplain looked at me almost sadly. By now I had my back right up against the wall and my forehead was bathed in light' (Camus 2000a, 114). This is also manifested in his non-judgemental acceptance of Raymond Sintés' friendship, a violently sinful man whom he will ultimately sacrifice his life for. Raymond asks whether they are '*copains*', approximately equivalent to 'mates' in English, with its literal origins in the Latin 'with+bread', that is, sharers of bread (the English 'companion' originating from the same etymological root). Meursault and Raymond are irrevocably bonded by a breaking of bread, as the evening on which they dine together is when Meursault is passively coerced into Raymond's grubby affairs, which eventually lead to his demise. The blood sausage and wine upon which they sup are 'a caricature of the wine and bread that are Christ's body and blood in the Mass and at the Last Supper' (Scherr 2009, 194)—at this Black Mass, it is Meursault who betrays himself. This scene also echoes the temptation of Christ in Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13 (Scherr 2009, 194–195), in which hunger is a corrupting force, but of course Meursault succumbs where Christ doesn't. Meursault is martyred on Raymond's account, as his violent dispute would no doubt have continued if Meursault had not stepped in. He is also the sacrificial lamb of societal propriety; in his unflinching honesty he is willing to die for authenticity. It is also interesting to note that Raymond shares a surname with Camus' own mother, Catherine Sintés, a hard-working, illiterate woman who was always a symbol of love and innocence for Camus. In *Le Premier Homme*, a fictionalised autobiography, he describes the mother of the protagonist, Jacques Cormery—she led 'a life resigned to suffering' (Camus 2013b, 61), 'her gentleness was her faith' (Camus 2013b, 129), 'she does not know Christ's life except on the cross, yet who is closer to it?' (Camus 2013b, 239), and most strikingly, 'His mother *is*

Christ' (Camus 2013b, 232). This nomenclative decision represents, on Camus' part, a desire to forgive. We are encouraged to contemplate the possibility that Raymond Sintés is just as innocent, sinful, and capable of suffering as any of us.

But Camus' symbolic treatment of Meursault as a Christ figure is just one element of the novel's response to Christianity. The mixture of innocence and culpability that Meursault represents, as well as his meaningless martyrdom, are both somewhat superficial compared to the philosophical movements made behind these features, which are far too often overlooked. Right at the end of the novel, whilst awaiting execution, there is a passage of Meursault's story which most truthfully represents Camus' own philosophical stance in the novel. Meursault, upon contemplating his imminent death, is transfigured. He does not look to a higher power to save him from his fate, however, like so many literary deathbed conversions. On the contrary, he has a kind of secular epiphany, a moment of communion with the world:

> I woke up with the stars shining on my face. Sounds of the countryside wafting in. The night air was cooling my temples with the smell of earth and salt. The wondrous peace of this sleeping summer flooded into me. At that point, on the verge of daybreak, there was a scream of sirens. They were announcing a departure to a world towards which I would now be forever indifferent. For the first time in a very long time I thought of mother. I felt that I understood why at the end of her life she'd taken a 'fiancé' and why she'd pretended to start again. There at the home, where lives faded away, there too the evenings were a kind of melancholy truce. So close to death, mother must have felt liberated and ready to live her life again. No one, no one at all had any right to cry over her. And I too felt ready to live my life again. As if the great outburst of anger had purged all my ills, killed all my hopes, I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and I laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world. (Camus 2000a, 117)

Here Meursault recognises the 'benign indifference' of the universe that he will become part of very soon, as his concerns do not transcend death. This does not bring him despair, however, as life from this moment, so close to death, seems all the more beautiful and sacred. Meursault's

understanding here even leads him to empathise with his mother, his recently discovered immanence being something they—and indeed all of us—have in common.

The contemplation of immanence that Meursault is swept away by in this final scene is something that characterises Camus' early works, where they illustrate a kind of horizontal transcendence. Camus spent his youth in Northern Algeria, with its breath-taking (and to this day) unspoilt Mediterranean landscapes, he clearly experienced an acute sense of communion with the world. He writes in *Noces*:

> Unity expresses itself here in terms of sea and sky. The heart senses it through a certain taste of the flesh that constitutes its bitterness and greatness. I am learning that there is no superhuman happiness, no eternity outside the curve of the days … Not that we should behave as beasts, but I can see no point in the happiness of angels. All I know is that this sky will last longer than I shall. And what can I call eternity except what will continue after my death? What I am expressing here is not the creature's complacency about his condition. It is something quite different. It is not always easy to be a man, even less to be a man who is pure. But to be pure means to rediscover that country of the soul where one's kinship with the world can be felt, where the throbbing of one's blood mingles with the violent pulsations of the afternoon sun. (Camus 1970, 90)

The kind of transcendence that Camus depicts does not appeal to anything *outside* of this world, it appeals precisely *to* this world—as something powerful, beautiful, and incomprehensible, that will outlive us, but that we are part of, and will continue to be after we are dead; as David Rathbone writes, 'His concept of transcendence is explicitly this-worldly, and inseparable from a kind of hyper-immanence' (Rathbone 2017, 126–127). This horizontal transcendence is therefore almost pantheistic, as all the spiritual feeling and profundity of emotion that humanity experiences is part of our physical world. As Camus writes in *La Mort heureuse*, 'The body has a soul in which the soul has no part' (Camus 2013a, 70).

This blurring of the line between physical and spiritual experience is portrayed in numerous ecstatic moments in Camus' works, exhibiting a hunger for life and the world which often borders on sexual, as it does

Noces ('nuptials' in English). Perhaps brought on by Camus' own experience of suffering as a tuberculotic, the life and death of the body becomes spiritual in itself, and the will to life almost lustful. In *La Femme adultère*, a short story from *L'Exil et le Royaume* (Camus 2006b) the protagonist Janine is not adulterous in the literal sense, but in escaping the drudgery of her mundane life (accompanying her husband, a travelling salesman, on unfulfilling business trips) for a moment in the Algerian wilderness in the final scene of the story, she experiences the same kind of horizontal transcendence that Meursault and the young Camus of *Noces* do. The title is of course taken from a story in John 8:3–11, 'The Adulterous Woman', in which Jesus prevents a woman's stoning by insisting that the first stone be cast by one who is free from sin. Here Camus is playfully toying with a spiritual/sexual encounter with the world—in his universe there is of course nothing sinful about Janine's illicit consummation with nature. Surrendering to the sublime is at once visceral and spiritual, the lustful will to live contrasted by humility before nature and acceptance of death.

But the life of the physical is as mundane as it is profound, it consists in the everyday, even if we are sometimes able, philosophically speaking, to peek behind the curtain. As Claire in *La Mort heureuse* said, 'On good days, if you trust life, life has to answer you' (Camus 2013a, 73). All we can do, as part of this world, is to trust in it, to have faith in the vitality which belongs to it, and to us. As Rathbone put it, 'Thus is transcendence conceived by Camus: temporary, pure, and strictly mundane' (Rathbone 2017, 131). This relationship between profoundly spiritual feeling, and the mundane physicality of matter we are part of, is so elusive that indeed the creative methods favoured by Camus are the only way to speak of a faith in it. Rathbone again writes:

> It can only be evoked with symbols, for life must be transformed from absurdity into meaningfulness by being taken as itself symbolic of the indestructibility of life itself. This is not a representation of an other-worldly eternal or immortal life, but an appreciation that the fleeting and fragile lives of mortals can themselves come to symbolise the inseparable and everlasting mixture of vitality and mortality that is the reality of all life in this world. (Rathbone 2017, 136)

Camus thus sees the rejection of vertical transcendence as a return to something much older, which predates Christianity; for Camus, Christianity corrupts horizontal transcendence and the kind of pagan communion with the world which celebrates the sacredness of life itself. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that this rejection is very much brought into being by his own experience of the events of the twentieth century, and the beginnings of an ethical element to this theory might have been present in 1942 when *L'Etranger* was published, but the following decade crystallised the urgency of such a venture for Camus, as can be seen in the development of his ethics throughout the later creative works.

5 Faith in Human Nature

As has become abundantly clear, Camus' agnosticism by no means renders life meaningless—despite the absurdity of our condition, human life is sacred to Camus. What is also becoming more salient, too, is that Camus derives his ethics precisely from the fact that this life is all there is, as the suffering in this life becomes more tragic without the mitigating power of transcendence. It is therefore in contemplation of the suffering of the twentieth century that Camus introduces to his writing a welcome and resounding faith in humanity. The philosophical concept which Camus utilised to expound this type of faith is 'revolt', as he formulates in *L'Homme révolté* (Camus 2000b, 51), referring to a kind of human solidarity that we have a duty to acknowledge in this brief existence (refer back to the previous chapter for a more in-depth analysis of the concept). Alongside this philosophical text, he also develops the idea of revolt in *La Peste*, an ethical fable which represents the need to struggle in the name of the Other, whether that be against disease or totalitarianism.

Throughout this novel there are numerous questions and answers directed at Christian thought, all within the ethical framework of revolt and solidarity. Dialogue between the narrator, Doctor Rieux, and the priest, Father Paneloux, are a key area in which these ideas are developed. Paneloux's responses to the suffering of the plague is the driving force behind many of these conversations: early on in the novel he is able to

dismiss the plague as an act of God, a warning to sinners to change their ways or be stricken too, echoing the Vichy discourse of penance France would have been so familiar with at that time (Ryan 1980, 149), but as he comes to witness the suffering of innocents first-hand he is thrown into spiritual turmoil. Surely we must trust the divine wisdom and love of God in these trying times? Rieux rejects this stance absolutely, telling him, 'I have a different notion of love; and to the day I die I shall refuse to love this creation in which children are tortured' (Camus 2002, 169). Paneloux adopts the rhetoric of fire and brimstone in his sermons, while in reality he cannot accept this suffering either, and just like the telling nomenclature of Emmanuel in *L'Etranger*, he pleads to a seemingly absent God, 'My God, save this child!' (Camus 2002, 168). Elsewhere in the novel, Tarrou, a fellow combatant of the plague, formulates his own ethical response to suffering. His search for morality without God is a Quixotic endeavour to become 'a saint without God' (Camus 2002, 196). For Rieux, the difficulties posed simply by being human in the face of universal suffering is enough, but Tarrou, who realises that the pure and perfect ideal of sainthood is something so divorced from our everyday struggles, believes the task of being human is even more ambitious (Camus 2002, 197).

Of course, Camus believes that the only way for humans to make any progress is to work tirelessly at the paradoxically unavoidable and impossible task of simply being human (as indeed he tells us all the way back in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), and as well as Rieux, he paints other portraits of the kind of secular saviour we need to move on from the horrors of war and totalitarianism. One such example is d'Arrast, in the short story *La Pierre qui pousse* from the collection *L'Exil et le Royaume*. Set in a remote town in Iguape, Brazil, this is yet another example of Camus' image of a pre-Christian world. While the tribal people of the town do observe Christianity, it is a ritualistic, pagan interpretation which seems so alien to d'Arrast on his arrival, fresh from France. Out of respect and friendship towards one of the townspeople who is unable to perform his annual ritual of carrying a boulder through the town to the church, he takes the task upon himself, instead carrying the boulder (Sisyphus-like) to the hearth of his friend, who is suffering from exhaustion, where he is

welcomed and celebrated. In this action, d'Arrast sets a precedent for the humanisation and secularisation of their practices. Thomas Claire writes:

> In examining the wealth of Christian imagery in 'La Pierre qui pousse', it is essential to note the distinction between d'Arrast and the Christ of the Christian tradition as seen by Camus: unlike Christ, who became an institutionalized figure preaching salvation through faith in the future, d'Arrast opens the way for the people of Iguape to find fulfilment in their present circumstances by teaching them that man must be directly responsible for his actions. (Claire 1976. 28)

d'Arrast's actions are in honour of human frailty and kinship which eludes social expectation, the solidarity which inspired him to take up his friend's burden also provoking his subversion of religious rites (as well as echoing Simon of Cyrene's shouldering of Christ's burden).[20] Camus sees this as the only possible way forward for any kind of humanist morality, as is summed up by the following sentiment taken from the aptly named *Le Premier Homme*. The protagonist, Jacques Cormery, loosely based on the young Camus himself, considers himself to be 'with no past, without ethics, without guidance, without religion, but glad to be so and to be in the light' (Camus 2013b, 150). This *'Bildungsroman* émotionnelle' is, as one critic put is, 'very much the book of others' (Grouix 1997, 189),[21] and it is easy to see why. After the horrific events of the early to mid-twentieth century, all that is left to do is to start from scratch—not in innocence, like Adam in the Garden of Eden, but in experience and humility. In these portrayals of revolt and human solidarity, Camus offers examples which encourage faith in humanity.

6 Christianity and *La Chute*

While *La Chute* is perhaps Camus' most bleak novel, it is also the one that is rooted most deeply in Christian imagery—so much so that it would be impossible to examine it comprehensively in this short chapter. The title obviously alludes to the story of Adam and Eve, and much like

that story, *La Chute* mourns a loss of innocence—but of course it is not the paradise of the garden of Eden that is lost, but the relative bliss of a time before the Holocaust and trench-warfare. The protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a self-proclaimed 'Judge-Penitent', confesses his sordid life-story to a stranger in a bar over the course of several evenings, and leads the reader through a nightmarish version of Amsterdam, the city's concentric canals mimicking the circles of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. Clamence, unlike his creator, has no sense of the sacred, and his stories paint a picture of feigned selflessness, cynicism and cowardice. Nevertheless, this novel is (as Maher writes) 'positively crying out for … spiritual redemption' (Maher n.d.). The reader, in the position of a priest hearing confession, is told (for example) of the night that Clamence, the sole witness to a woman's suicide as she jumped from a bridge in Paris, instead of trying to save her simply left the scene without backward glance. Clamence is apparently haunted by this episode and ironically (considering his namesake John the Baptist) Clamence cannot stand the sight of water, and will no longer cross a bridge at night. This sarcastic raconteur cannot escape his own sins, let alone cleanse those of others: he tells us, 'With me, there is no benediction, no absolutions are handed out' (Camus 2006d, 82). The list of such allusions and symbols in the novel goes on.

While there isn't room in the current chapter to thoroughly catalogue the full wealth of religious imagery in *La Chute*, it is certainly important to try and understand the role that Christianity has in this novel, and Camus' response to the moral questions which arise in the text. Clamence, on the surface, lived a life of virtue. He was a lawyer who specialised in representing vulnerable people (such as widows and orphans), went out of his way to perform good deeds, and was duly successful and celebrated for it. But Clamence is the epitome of a selfish moralist—he does all the right things for all the wrong reasons. When Clamence finally owns up to himself about his duplicitous egotism, he abandons his career and adopts the mysterious title of 'Judge-Penitent', seeking (or so it seems) redemption through the practice of confession.[22] He confesses his mistreatment of women, numerous misdeed and betrayals, and even a bizarre episode in which he adopts the position of 'Pope' presiding over a POW camp, and legitimises stealing water from a dying prisoner because of his

fictitious spiritual importance. But unfortunately for Clamence, where there is no God, there is no divine redemption. Maher writes, 'The existentialists had killed God, yet they offered nothing to replace Him, thus leaving a guilt-ridden man like Jean-Baptiste Clamence with nowhere to turn … And so he turns to his only alternative, his fellow man' (Maher n.d.). And so Clamence spends his days in bars, waiting for a sympathetic listener (reader) to come along and share in his spiritual anguish.

While it is true that Clamence has no one to turn to but his fellow man, it is not the case, that *La Chute* 'provides no answers, only painful, almost desperate questions', as Maher goes on to suggest (Maher n.d.). Through Clamence's endless embittered chatter, the desire for a Christ figure is ever present. He recounts an anecdote about a man who, whilst a friend was imprisoned, spent every night sleeping on a hard floor out of solidarity to his friend. When Clamence asks, 'Who would sleep on the floor for us, my dear sir?' (Camus 2006d, 21), the simple humility and solidarity that Clamence begs for in such a question, however, is nothing miraculous or transcendent—in fact this moving image of self-sacrifice is purely human. This is the kind of gesture that echoes Camus' emphasis on love and solidarity that we have already seen elsewhere, and in fact, as Barry and Paterson write, 'Camus seems to be telling us that the key to human community or communion is found in the human Christ who alone was free and willing to "sleep on the floor for us"' (Barry and Paterson 1976, 41), and thus *La Chute* 'may … be read as an extended struggle towards dialogue and relation' (Barry and Paterson 1976, 38). In the world of *La Chute*, there is no God, no ultimate redemption, and we must live with our guilt—but through recognition of our position in the world, and solidarity with our fellow human beings, we can all take on the role of the human Christ, and have faith in each other.

7 Chapter Conclusion

As we have seen, Camus spent a great deal of his career responding to the questions raised by Christianity, particularly focusing on theological responses to suffering. Camus' non-belief is not motivated by nihilism, or even scepticism towards mysticism or concepts of the sacred—in fact

Camus' creative works demonstrate his understanding and respect for these aspects of Christian thought and writing. As John Cruickshank writes, 'What makes Camus so significant, and in many ways representative, a figure of his own generation is the fact that he experienced a religious need in its widest sense yet was unable to accept religious belief' (Cruickshank 1967, 324). Camus personally rejects Christianity on the grounds that he can see no reason that suffering could ever be legitimised, but his critique of Christianity is really only aimed at 'phantasmic Christianity, that is, Christianity when it is pathological in its otherworldliness, and either indifferent, masochistic, or destructive to the world' (Cristaudo 2011, 154), and thus he continued to engage with Christian thought, his 'brilliant working at the frontier between belief and unbelief … and his effort to live honestly and decently despite the ideological horrors of the twentieth century' (Royal 2014, 26) characterising his creative works, and motivating his choice of Christian symbolism to illustrate moral problems.

In this chapter I have given a brief account of Camus' ethical response to suffering, demonstrating just some of the instances in his creative works when he has used Christianity as a springboard for developing his moral response to the chaos of the early to mid-twentieth century. From secular Christ-figures to prophetic plagues, Camus elaborated his need for a secular faith explicitly through Christian symbolism, thereby demonstrating both his respect for Christian thought and scripture, as well as critiquing the ways in which its morality failed to respond to the suffering around him. As one critic writes, 'The works of Camus … have asked the right questions and constrained Christians to evolve ever more satisfactory answers to them' (Peyre 1960, 21). Through his rich weaving of Christian imagery and humanist ethics, Camus formulates a kind of faith that he sees as the only way to move forward—faith in nature and in humanity itself. Given the extent to which Camus investigated Christian theology, it is hardly a surprise that Minister Mumma saw his potential as a powerful ally. After all, what could be more persuasive in the process of conversion than the idea that Camus, who had voiced so many nuanced concerns with Christianity, had finally had his doubts assuaged? Unfortunately for Mumma, Camus' stance on Christianity is by now too clear to make his story believable—nevertheless, Camus' responses to

Christianity should earn him a place in Christian ethics for many years to come. Having examined Christianity as a key conceptual springboard for Camus' ethics, and analysed his theoretical and creative responses to it, the following chapter will now move on to Camus' own metaphysical understanding of the universe. Returning to the concept of the absurd (as discussed in Chap. 1), Chap. 3 aims to unpack the various rhetorical devices used in *L'Etranger*, arguing that these creative methods encourage a kind of non-propositional engagement with the concept of the absurd.

Notes

1. In French, 'Je lis souvent que je suis athée, j'entends parler de mon athéisme. Or ces mots ne me disent rien, ils n'ont pas de sens pour moi. Je ne crois pas à Dieu *et* je ne suis pas athée'.
2. This chapter is adapted from an earlier article originally published in *Nordisk judaistik/Scandinavian Jewish Studies*, under the title '"*Saints without God": Camus's poetics of secular faith*' (Whistler 2018a). I am much indebted to the journal for granting me permission to revisit this material here.
3. In French, 'un dialogue croyant-incroyant'.
4. In French, 'j'ai l'impression que la foi est moins une paix qu'une espérance tragique'.
5. In French, 'Le christianisme lui est apparu alors comme une illusion, en même temps qu'une consolation et un besoin à l'âge où les forces nous abandonnent: c'est une religion de vieillards'.
6. My conception of 'The Other' is roughly in line with that of Levinas' (as developed in Levinas 1987, and elsewhere), but it is not within the scope of the current book to engage with Levinas' work in any great detail.
7. In French, 'La dialogue de la Foi et de la Raison est mis pour la première fois en pleine lumière par Saint Augustin … Cette raison s'assouplit. Elle s'éclaire des lumières de la Foi. … Ce n'est pas à Dieu qu'il faut croire, mais *en Dieu*'.
8. In French, 'C'est un perpétuel effort pour concilier des notions contradictoires … Raison mystique, Intelligence sensible, Dieu immanent et transcendant, les oppositions abondent. Elles marquent toutes cependant un balancement constant entre le sensible et l'intellectuel, l'aspect religieux des principes et leur pouvoir explicative. Dans ce dialogue du

cœur et de la Raison, la vérité ne peut s'exprimer que par des images … couler l'intelligible dans une forme sensible, rendre à l'intuition ce qui appartenait à la Raison'.

9. In French, 'Grec par son besoin de coherence, Chrétien par les inquiétudes de sa sensibilité'.
10. In French, 'Plotin décrit l'intelligence de façon sensuelle. Sa Raison est vivante, étoffée, émouvante comme un mélange d'eau et de lumière'.
11. In French, 'C'est donc aux enfants que le Royaume de Dieu est promis, mais aussi aux savants qui ont su dépouiller leur savoir pour comprendre la vérité du cœur', 'Ce dédain de toute spéculation'.
12. In French, 'Camus rejette en bloc les théories, les raisonnements, les abstractions … Une éthique personnelle voit le jour dans la prise en considération de l'autre. La solidarité se révèle en même temps qu'elle s'éprouve … C'est regarder l'autre comme un autre soi-même. C'est lui donner un visage, une forme, une limite, c'est l'inscrire peut-être avant toute chose dans les sphères du charnellement communicable'.
13. In French, 'les vrais Chrétiens sont ceux qui ont réalisé ce triomphe de la chair martyrisé. Jésus étant homme tout l'accent a été porté sur sa mort: on ne connait guère de plus horrible physiquement. C'est … aux mains déchirées et aux articulations craquelées, qu'il faut songer pour imaginer le terrifiant image de torture que le Christianisme a érigée en symbole'.
14. In French, 'l'exemple unique d'une expérience collective de la mort … réaliser cette idée de la mort revient à doter notre vie d'un sens nouveau.
15. In French, 'L'Incroyant et les Chrétiens'.
16. In French, 'Je partage avec vous la même horreur du mal. Mais je ne partage pas votre espoir et je continue à lutter contre cet univers où des enfants souffrent et meurent'.
17. In French, 'Qui donne rien n'a rien. Le plus grand malheur n'est pas de ne pas être aimé, mais de ne pas aimer.'
18. In French, 'Reconnaître la nécessité des ennemis. Aimer qu'ils soient … Récupérer la plus grande puissance, non pour dominer mais pour donner.'
19. The figurative images which abound in Camus' portmanteau nomenclature of the name Meursault (in *L'Etranger*) or Mersault (in *La Mort heureuse*) are truly striking. This name evokes numerous words and meanings in French; *la mer* (the sea), *meurs* (a form of the verb 'to die'), *la mère* (mother), *le soleil* (the sun), *le sol* (meaning 'soil' or 'earth'), and *un saut* (a leap). The name conjures other more complex images, such as a leap

in to death ('*meurt*' and '*saut*'), the giving of the mother to the earth ('*mère*' and '*sol*'), as Meursault does in *L'Etranger*, and the deadly heat of the sun ('*meurt*' and '*soleil*') which overcomes Meursault on that fateful day at the beach. See Longstaffe (2007, 80) for further discussion of this topic.

20. A dimension of this story which was pointed out to me by Prof Sophie Bastien.
21. In French, '*Le Premier Homme* est bien le livre des autres'.
22. See Whistler (2018b) for a fuller examination of the role of confession in Camus' work.

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3

Narrating the Absurd

1 Chapter Introduction

Whenever Albert Camus is discussed outside of Camus scholarship, the first of his works mentioned is without exception *L'Etranger*; it therefore seems prudent to dedicate the first extended case study of this book to the novel. Too often dismissed as a youthful manifesto of indifference, this text is in fact a lot more ambitious than that. Certainly, *L'Etranger* is a philosophical novel concerned with the absurd (a concept that was examined in Chap. 1), but to really appreciate the full depth of this novel, it is necessary to examine the stylistic and linguistic intricacy of Camus' composition. While a number of articles make an attempt at this task (a selection of which I will make reference to later on), they are by no means definitive: not only do they tend to have a rather narrow scope, and there is also a distinct lack of communication between French and English language scholarship on the matter. Consequently, the following chapter will try to formulate a more holistic account of the stylistic venture of *L'Etranger*, whilst also attempting to bridge the French/English divide that is so prominent in the literature. While this is a worthwhile goal in

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itself, I pursue it with the intention of backing up a more substantial claim: that Camus strives for an authenticity of style which allows us to see into the world of Meursault and his own encounter with the absurd. I suggest that Camus wants us to experience this world in as unmediated a fashion as possible, in order for its moral and philosophical content to come across more poignantly (as opposed to the dry exposition of logic-based prosed that I argued against in Chap. 1). As we have already seen, for Camus meaning lies not in the world itself, but in our ability to create meaning—something which Meursault himself is only able to do when he is forced to leave his world behind. Another task of the current chapter, following the lead of Chap. 1, is therefore to map out the relation between the stylistic form of the novel and its philosophical content.

In a 1946 essay on the task of the writer, George Orwell writes:

> A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly? (Orwell 2004, 113)

Camus' *L'Etranger* demonstrates just the kind of scrupulousness that Orwell describes. Every word is in its right place, and the style is striking in its economy. The simplicity of the style gives the reader a real sense of the man Meursault—even what is left out communicates volumes about his personality. We shall explore in more detail later how the simple descriptions express indifference, his blunt dialogue betrays his social clumsiness, and the novel as a whole invokes an authentic experience of the man and the absurd world he lives in. As a writer similarly concerned with authenticity, Orwell makes claims in his theoretical essays (such as the one quoted above) that will help me to elucidate my own. I will therefore utilise Orwell's ideas on style, as well as Richard Lehan's essays on Camus' American heritage and Sartre's own commentary on *L'Etranger* (two commentaries which are as relevant and insightful today as they were at the time of publication), as a means of unpacking Camus' stylistic venture in the novel. In the next section (Sect. 2), I will begin my examination of the

style of *L'Etranger* by making reference to some important influences of Camus', that is, Ernest Hemingway and James M. Cain, suggesting that Camus continued their search for stylistic authenticity in his own work. The following section (Sect. 3) will take a look at a particular stylistic feature of *L'Etranger* which is regularly overlooked by English scholarship—that is, Camus' innovative use of the French *passé composé* tense. Here I examine the consequences of such a choice, in terms of linguistic rhythm, philosophical and social implications, and the unusual temporal vantage point this tense lends to the novel. In the final section (Sect. 4), I turn to the philosophy behind the style. Most readers of Camus are familiar with the concept of the absurd, but here I suggest that *L'Etranger* goes beyond this concept, and that through our experience of the mind of Meursault (facilitated by Camus' stylistic innovation), we are able to accompany our protagonist on his moral and philosophical journey.

2 Authenticity and the Form of Thought

Despite the 75 years since its publication, *L'Etranger* is still unable to shake-off its reputation as a kind of nihilistic rite of passage; this is perhaps to do with Camus' association with the existentialist movement. At the heart of existentialism are the tenets of authenticity and radical freedom, and for many, this is what Meursault appears to represent. But as Jacob Golomb put it, 'Meursault does not become a hero of authenticity because he kills the Arab without any reasonable motive. His authenticity is acquired only after the murder, and more precisely, after he is sentenced to death' (Golomb 1994, 270). Only when his freedom, and ultimately his life, is being taken away from him is Meursault able to realise that his life is not just a matter of indifference—he loves his life and is loath to leave it all behind. And so, this is a novel about authenticity, but that authenticity isn't to be found where it is usually sought. However, I suggest that authenticity is not only a focal point of Meursault's philosophical epiphany—the novel's style is also painstakingly crafted with authenticity in mind. But Camus is by no means original in this venture—the relation between the simplicity of prose and the authenticity of communication can naturally be traced back to the American Novel.

In his commentary on *L'Etranger*, Sartre cited an apparently popular idea that *L'Etranger* resembles something like 'Kafka written by Hemingway' (Sartre 2007, 88) and this comparison, while imprecise, hits on something important. Like Kafka, Camus' subject matter is the incomprehensibility of the human experience, but like the novels of Hemingway, the style of *L'Etranger* is often clipped, brief, and abrupt. It is not within the scope of this chapter to address what we might call 'the Kafka in *L'Etranger*' (this will be returned to in the following chapter), but this section will examine 'the Hemingway in *L'Etranger*' in some detail. While the prose of these novels is simpler than many, there is more going on here than immediately meets the eye; in fact, their simplicity is an attempt to communicate the human experience nakedly, without appealing to grand literary sensibilities that might detract from the force of the novel.

'The American Novel' is characterised above all by a desire for authenticity: authentic characters, descriptions, sensations, and language are the most recognisable features of these works. Camus has traditionally been compared most often to Hemingway, and there certainly are similarities. Richard Lehan's comparative studies of *L'Etranger* and *The Sun Also Rises* offer some insights into how the styles of these novels achieve this feeling of authenticity, pointing out how sentence structure seems to reflect the characters' developing awareness of the world around them. He writes:

> The nouns are syntactically structured with anticipatory subjects, or with predicate adjectives, so that a noun usually precedes an adjective, emphasizing that the narrator first becomes aware of things and then responds to their qualities… The object of each sentence usually becomes the subject of the next clause. (Lehan 1964, 236)

Take for example, the sentence, 'The trees were big, and the foliage was thick' (Hemingway 2004, 102), recounted by Jake Barnes in Hemingway's 1926 novel, or the phrase 'un petit chalutier qui avançait, imperceptiblement dans la mer éclatante' (Camus 2006, I: 169),[1] from Camus' Meursault. The little details are given morsel by morsel, following on from each other with their own kind of natural, temporal logic, allowing the reader to experience the world of the character with immediacy. As Lehan put it, 'Mind and emotion are caught up in the natural sequence

of things' (Lehan 1964, 236)—in other words, the style in both of these novels allows us to experience the world from the vantage point of the protagonists, as they encounter it.

Because of similarities such as this, it is often overlooked that, at the time of writing *L'Etranger*, Camus was heavily influenced by James M. Cain's 1934 novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Adam and Noël 1995, 66). This novel (though not as well-known as its filmic adaptation) is a classic American Novel. Its characters are down to earth, unpretentious people, and though the plot is dramatic and suspenseful, it is highly believable—authentic. The plot of Cain's novel itself is also somewhat similar to that of *L'Etranger.* Richard Lehan remarks:

> The climax of each novel is a murder followed by litigation; the novels conclude in a murder-cell, the hero waiting ultimate execution, talking or writing to a priest. Both Frank Chambers and Meursault are social misfits, passive heroes who respond to immediate stimuli, react rather than act. The novels are told from an immediate point of view, secure narrative compression, and employ retrospective narration; they end ironically with the hero dying for a crime other than the one for which he is guilty; each novel secures a prophetic sense of doom and anticipates the hero's fate; both use the climax tendentiously. Cain's novel, of course, lacked a symbolic structure and a metaphysical frame of reference. (Lehan 1964, 235)

Here Lehan points out some key narrational and structural similarities, and he is right to emphasise the difference being the lack of philosophical content in Cain's novel (we shall return to the philosophy behind *L'Etranger* later on in this chapter).

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the style of *L'Etranger* is its short sentences. Throughout the novel, the first-person narrative in which the story is told, as well as Meursault's interactions with other characters, are both characterised by concise sentences. For example, take the famous opening lines of the novel, 'Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas' (Camus 2006, I: 141).[2] One need look no further than the very first page to characterise the thoughts of Meursault—they are truncated and follow on from one another in an abrupt fashion. We get a sense that the way in which the world presents itself to Meursault is

uncomplicated and un-analytic. He tells us later on, 'I'd rather got out of the habit of analysing myself' (Camus 2000, 65), but it is not just himself that he accepts without question, it is everything he encounters. From his friendship with the dubious Raymond to his physical surroundings, the short sentences in which he expresses himself mimic his thought processes, offering a window into Meursault's subjectivity.

When Meursault is triggered to reflect further, these afterthoughts either follow in a second short sentence or follow a conjunction, for example, the following sentence describing the behaviour of the inhabitants of the retirement home: 'Ils se taisaient quand nous passions. Et derrière nous, les conversations reprenaient' (Camus 2006, I: 143).[3] This effect has also been commented upon by Renaud. He asks:

> Why does Camus keep to these short sentences? For a start, they reflect the life of Meursault in recalling the small acts that follow one another without any grand logic, or that briskly detach themselves, instead of flowing from one to another—that which gives life a unity that Meursault doesn't question. We find many simple conjunctions and notably temporal conjunctions, likewise a large number of temporal adverbs. By contrast, in the subordinate clauses there are few emotional or volitional connections. This truncated style also justifies itself on the grounds of plausibility. Perhaps the reader does not understand it straight away, but soon it becomes apparent that the narrator is in the process of recounting a period of his life. (Renaud 1957, 295)[4]

In other words, events, scenery, people, all flow past the island that is Meursault, giving the reader the impression that all this is happening in real-time, momentarily captured by the unquestioning gaze of our protagonist. If we look at the following passage from *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, one could easily make the same observations as we have already about *L'Etranger*:

> Next thing I knew, the guys on the stretcher picked me up and followed the young guy, White, out of the courtroom. Then they went with me on the double across a couple of halls into a room with three or four cops in it. White said something about Katz, and the cops cleared out. They set me down on the desk, and then the guys on the stretcher went out. White

> walked around a little, and then the door opened and a matron came in with Cora. Then White and the matron went out, and the door closed, and we were alone. I tried to think of something to say, and couldn't. (Cain 2005, 69)

Again, the sentences are short, and the wording simple. Our narrator is isolated, watching the world move around him inexplicably, temporal conjunctions illustrating the passage of time, moment by moment. Both protagonists are passive observers of a world that moves around them without any grand logic, unable to intervene vocally.

Readers who are more familiar with the style of *L'Etranger* have probably noticed that not all the sentences in the novel are constructed like this; there are instances in the novel of longer, more complex grammatical structures and more complicated vocabulary, and also repetitions of certain themes or details. These exceptions are not simply oversights; rather, they demonstrate differences in the patterns of Meursault's thought. Way back in 1957, Renaud commented on this effect:

> In fact, Meursault recounts the events which lead him to be where he is, and, along the way he lingers awhile, inevitably, over certain aspects of his precious life as a free man that he didn't appreciate at the time. Such flashbacks evoke nothing but the liveliest impressions, which for Meursault were above all physical. From which, isolated facts and a repetition of the same themes: the sun, heat, light, gestures of people and above all their manners, shining objects, meals, the beach and Marie. And finally, that which is simple like life was before the trial, is expressed simply. Of course, those that wish to talk of God, the soul or justice use 'long sentences' … but for Meursault life offered nothing very complicated. (Renaud 1957, 295)[5]

Meursault is a sensual character, and in his incarceration, he is prone to dwelling on those things which are more salient in his memories. But here Renaud also points out an important and illuminating contrast—not only are Meursault's reflections more detailed when he is recounting events which are particularly valuable to him, the language used by his interlocutors when speaking of profound topics such as spirituality is more complex and 'literary'. I would add that in those episodes of

Meursault's own soul-searching, the sentence length and complexity are greatly increased, for example, 'Comme si cette grande colère m'avait purgé du mal, vidé d'espoir, devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d'étoiles, je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde' (Camus 2006, I: 213).[6] This, yet again, makes it apparent that the narrative of this novel not only represents the *content* of Meursault's thoughts, but also the *form* of them. Like that of the American Novels it draws upon, the style of *L'Etranger* attempts to communicate the phenomenology of the narrator's thought itself. The complex passages of the novel which represent a departure from the simplicity of style championed by Camus' American forefathers represents exactly what is missing in novels like *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*—a clear philosophical aim. Through this shift in style and its correspondence to the novel's philosophical content, we as readers are brought from the problem of the absurd to the solution of creating our own meaning. This claim I shall return to later (in Sect. 4). For now, let us turn to a feature of *L'Etranger* that cannot be compared to anything found in the American Novel.

3 The Phenomenology of *Passé Composé*

Whilst it is possible to discuss many aspects of the style of *L'Etranger* via the use of English translations, it is impossible to examine Camus' use of grammatical tenses without referring to the original French. Tenses should be considered extremely important in any stylistic analysis of this novel, because the simplicity of the sentences means that often there is little happening on the surface except a recounting of actions. This heavy reliance on action verbs is linked to the preoccupation with authenticity discussed in the previous section; as Richard Lehan put it, 'The twentieth century novel employs a prose heavy in verbs. The predominance of verbs suggests a distrust of intellectualization and an awareness of man's tragic destiny as a creature subordinated to time and death' (Lehan 1960, 44). These novels are about human life, which often consists in the everyday actions we perform. An analysis of the tenses used in an English language novel would bear little fruit, however, compared to the rich and diverse

conjugations available in French. Thus, this section will examine the implications of Camus' innovative use of the *passé composé* tense.

There are two main past tenses in French: the perfect and the imperfect. The perfect tense is used when an action is complete at the time spoken of, for example, 'She ate breakfast this morning'. The imperfect tense indicates that the action was ongoing at the time spoken of, for example, 'She was eating breakfast when the telephone rang'. In French, the perfect tense can be communicated in two ways, one informal and spoken, the *passé composé* (roughly 'composite past'), the other formal, literary and never used in speech, the *passé simple* ('simple past'). *L'Etranger* is written almost entirely in *passé composé*[7], the vernacular, oral construction. Camus' use of this tense sets this novel apart from traditional *romans français*: the *passé composé* tense is sometimes used in contemporary written French, but at the time, Camus' employment of it is highly innovative as classical French novels are all written in the *passé simple*. Several French critics have speculated on the reasoning behind this decision, but the language barrier entailed in the problem means that it has rarely been acknowledged in English language scholarship. As the two different constructions differ predominantly in written form, rather than in meaning, this may appear to be a superficial choice. In fact, there are several areas in which this move gains some palpable significance: rhythm, temporality, and prestige. This section will explain Camus' choice in more detail, and, drawing on the French scholarship, offer some suggestions as to the purpose of such a move.

The *passé composé* tense is formed in French by combining a past participle of a verb with the verb '*avoir*' ('to have'), or the verb '*être*' ('to be'); take, for example, the construction 'Elle *a mangé*'. While this would appear to correspond to constructions in English such as 'She has eaten', the meaning of *passé composé* constructions is closer to the simpler form, 'She ate'. In standard literary French (*passé simple*), one would use 'Elle *mangea*'. Notice how the *passé composé* construction means that the verb is comprised of two halves—one derived from *avoir* (the auxiliary verb) and another from the main verb (the past participle, in this case '*manger*'). Of course, this gives the language of the novel a particular aesthetic rhythm. As the novel is composed almost entirely in this tense, nigh on every verb has an added short syllable, the language gaining a *staccato*

quality. This once again mirrors the inner language of Meursault, the disjointed quality of his reflections and observations, aiding an authentic experience of his world. Sartre too commented on how the construction seems to reflect the detached atmosphere of the novel:

> It is to accentuate solitude of each phrase that Camus has chosen to write his novel in *passé composé* … the verb is shattered, broken in two: on one side we find a past participle that has lost all transcendence, inert as a thing, on the other side the verb 'to be' that has nothing but the copular sense, that meets the substantive participle as the attribute of the subject; the transitive character of the verb is unconscious, the sentence is fixed, its reality at present is as a noun. (Sartre 2007, 94)

The auxiliary verb (*avoir* or *être*) thus represents little but a grammatical placeholder, while the main verb in its preterite form is deprived of its usual flowing conjugative action. The meaning of the verb therefore seems somehow inert, isolated, and objective, and the rhythm of it disjointed—just like Meursault himself.

Camus' choice of tense also makes the temporality of *L'Etranger* ambiguous. While I have said that there is very little semantic difference aside from orthography between the two constructions, it is also true that on the rare occasion that *passé composé* is used in formal writing, it is to signify that an action occurred in the immediate past, whereas the *passé simple*'s traditional use is more historical. This distinction is roughly equal to the difference between 'Elle *a mangé* son petit déjeuner *ce matin*' ('She *ate* her breakfast *this morning*') versus 'Elle *mangea* son petit déjeuner *ce jour-là*' ('She *ate* her breakfast *that day*'). Combined with Camus' occasional use of the future tense in the novel (e.g. 'Je *prendrai* l'autobus à deux heures et j'*arriverai* dans l'après-midi') (Camus 2006, I: 141), and words indicating the present moment (such as '*Aujourd'hui* maman est morte') (Camus 2006, I: 141), this effect means that the narrative is situated in a point in time which is not severed from the present—as though we are being informed of the events as they happen (Adam and Noël 1995, 68). The reader is given an impossible vantage point on the world of Meursault—he is alone, but we are with him. Not only is the reader

able to engage with an authentic portrayal of the mind of the protagonist, we are also able to experience events as they unfold, style offering a phenomenological window into his very being, as well as seeing the world through his eyes.

Meanwhile, Étienne Balibar comments on the social implications of Camus' use of *passé composé*, making connections between Meursault's simple language and the educational and linguistic development of French children. French children learn *passé composé* long before they are taught how to use *passé simple*, meaning that naturally any literary text written in *passé composé* betrays a certain modesty—if not naïveté. This certain child-like familiarity also comes across in the way that Meursault, throughout the novel, refers to his mother as 'Maman', roughly equivalent to 'Mum' or 'Mummy'. But given the elevated and prestigious nature of *passé simple*, the ability to write in this tense at all indicates a certain degree of privilege, literary French being far less use to the working classes. Balibar writes, 'The discourse of Meursault apparently reflects reality laid bare, because this discourse reproduces elementary French whilst distorting it, independently of literary French' (Balibar 1972, 117). Meursault's language has an authenticity twinned with the straightforward aim of basic communication, and indeed it is communication which Meursault struggles with most. When Meursault faces trial, he is unable to speak the language of the court. He is without artifice, both socially and linguistically, and is therefore at a disadvantage by his inability to use the highfaluting language of legal and social prestige. But I suggest that, instead of Meursault's modest use of language acting as the barb of a social critique (as Balibar indicates), the unpretentious simplicity of the novel's style suspends the kind of aesthetic judgement that elevated, literary language invites, instead allowing the philosophical aspects of the novel to become more salient. The resulting effect is a phenomenological experience of Meursault's life, and an understanding, as it were, 'from the inside', of the ethical problems he faces. Thus, the following section will look into the philosophy present both *behind* and *within* the style itself.

4 Doing Philosophy in Style

Now we have examined some of the techniques utilised by Camus to communicate the experience of Meursault, it is time to turn to the philosophical project of the novel. Camus, on the first page of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, tells us that the absurd should be considered merely as a starting point (Camus 2006, I: 219).[8] It is not until the publication of *L'Homme revolté* that Camus fully develops a moral philosophy, but I suggest that *L'Etranger* illustrates a philosophical journey which is key to the genesis of Camus' ethics. This section will therefore look not only at how the philosophy of the absurd is illustrated within the novel, but also how we might learn morally from the absurd as a starting point. Unlike many philosophical novels, this one doesn't address its philosophical content directly; instead it is established through descriptions of the sensations and experiences of Meursault. George Orwell writes:

> When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then if you want to describe the thing you have been visualising, you probably hunt about till you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start… Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meanings as clear as one can through pictures or sensations. (Orwell 2004, 118–119)

While the descriptions in *L'Etranger* do of course consist of words, instead of being told abstract statements about philosophy, we are given a sense of Meursault as a person through the way that he perceives the world around him, and the sensations he experiences. As Sartre put it, 'We could say that the aim of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is to convey the *idea* of the absurd. And that of *The Stranger* to convey the *feeling*' (Sartre 2007, 85).[9] He continues, 'In *The Stranger*, [Camus] has attempted to be silent. But how can one be silent with words? How can one convey the unthinkable and disorderly succession of presents through concepts? This challenge involves resorting to a new technique' (Sartre 2007, 87–88). Descriptions of images and sensations in the novel therefore point towards the more abstract things we could say about Meursault (such as

that he is indifferent or that he struggles to communicate effectively), but we remain in the phenomenological realm of sensation, which is where Meursault himself truly resides.

If we consider that the philosophical concept of the absurd rests on the premise that the universe is indifferent to our projects as humans, it is easy to see how the story of Meursault illustrates it. Meursault is a human animal, and his pleasure in the sensual side of life; the sun, the sea, and sex dominate his character and actions. But the world outside Meursault can be as incomprehensible and hostile as it is gratifying; after all, the senseless crime Meursault commits which leads to his eventual death is all because of a day out at the beach. Meursault's responses to the world around him are incidental, a kind of cause and effect that mirrors the universe's own indifference: he is hungry, he eats; he is asked a question, he answers plainly; he finds a woman attractive, he approaches her. Meursault even commits murder in unthinking response to physical stimulus.

Of course, Camus himself has received enormous amounts of criticism on account of his authorial decision to have Meursault kill off a nameless 'Arab'. Amash notes, 'Regardless of how he personally might have felt about the matter, Camus had to choose a character whose killing did not arouse a great deal of sympathy' (Amash 1967, 7), suggesting that French attitudes at the time made killing 'the Arab' an easy plot device as readers might easily dismiss it as a detail of the more important story of Meursault. Of course, this does not exactly excuse Camus; as Vincent argues, 'Camus should have known that, even if well-intentioned, the end did not justify the means… It was only a matter of time before the retreated Arabian death re-emerged and took a prominent place in interpretations of the novel' (Grégoire 2012, 93).[10] In Chap. 7, we will examine Meursault's culpability in the context of postcolonial theory in greater detail, but the purpose of this chapter is to understand Meursault's world *as he sees it*—blind-spots, *manques morales*, and all. We already know Meursault to be unreflective, impulsive easily overcome by his senses; King puts it rather more bluntly—'Meursault is essentially self-centred… The Arab doesn't exist for him, not because he is an Arab, but simply because he is an unknown man. Meursault does not think about the fact that he caused someone's death' (King 1980, 39). Meursault's experience is simpler and

more causal still: the heat of the day is an assault on his senses, and he loses control, this domino effect continuing from Meursault's senses, through the trigger and hammer of the gun, to the bullet, and out into the world. As Lehan put it:

> The point is that the murder of the Arab is as accidental and gratuitous as Camus's world itself. Meursault does not mean to kill the Arab. He goes to the spot by accident. He meets the Arab by chance. The sun happens to be unpleasantly hot, and Meursault happens to feel terribly uncomfortable. When the Arab draws a knife, the blade by chance catches the sun and the reflection flashes into Meursault's eyes whereupon he responds mechanically—like a coiled spring—and the gun goes off. (Lehan 1964, 234)

So *L'Etranger*, in plot and protagonist, contributes to the reader's experience of the absurd. What is also of interest to this chapter, however, is the relation between the style of the novel and its philosophical content. We have already seen examples of the intricacy of the novel's style; so now it is time to turn to the relationship between these techniques and the philosophical message that Camus wants to get across.

In Sect. 2, we saw how elements of the style of this novel (and those of Hemingway and Cain) embody the pattern of the protagonist's thoughts. There is indeed 'an intricate relationship [in *L'Etranger*] between the style, the object of description, the world order, and the mood of the character-narrator' (Lehan 1959, 259). The absurd itself is also illustrated by the short sentence length so prevalent in the novel. These sentences not only authentically portray the mind of Meursault, but they also illustrate an absurd life as just a meaningless sequence of events, following on from each other without any transcendent logic. As Sartre writes:

> On the one hand there is the amorphous, everyday flow of reality as it is experienced, and, on the other, the edifying reconstruction of this reality by human reasoning and speech. When first brought face-to-face with simple reality, the reader confronts it without being able to recognise it in its rational transposition. This is the source of the absurd—that is, or our inability to conceive, using our concepts and our words, what occurs in the world. (Sartre 2007, 86)

In other words, there is a direct link between the style of the novel and the reader's experience of the absurd. Renaud remarks at the feeling of monotony that suffuses Meursault's account, saying, 'From start to finish, the sentences in the narrative are uniformly short, or divided by a studied punctuation that maintains the same rhythm', suggesting that it is these short sentences which are 'so effective … at marking the monotonous course of existence' (Renaud 1957, 290).[11] Sartre goes as far as to suggest that this alienating grammar and disjointed style means that *L'Etranger* isn't in fact a narrative work at all, because narrative implies cause and effect, whereas this novel does not possess the same kind of internal logic (Sartre 2007, 98)—thus, the very syntax of the novel is a manifestation of the absurd. And so, we see that the philosophy of the absurd permeates every phrase of Meursault's, every detail of his life, and the way he views every object.

As was discussed in §2, the noun/adjective structure used frequently in the novel illustrates Meursault's perception of the world temporally. Meursault notices objects and people in the world around him, followed by an awareness of their attributes, just as he notices, passively, his own physical sensations. Meursault is at the mercy of his physical being, eventually leading him to kill a man 'because of the sun' (Camus 2000, 99), and Lehan too connects these unreflective responses to the physical world and the crime that Meursault's commits:

> The noun-adjective order, the mind working in a moment of time, the narrator trying to impose order on the jumble of reality and sense impressions—all reveal a mind that never gets beyond the realm of physical existence. These two things—an accidental and gratuitous world and a mind that responds to physical stimuli—are the motives for the Arab's murder. (Lehan 1964, 237)

So not only do we get a sense of Meursault's thoughts as though they are happening in real-time, we also get a sense of how indifference affects his actions. Meursault is thus a vessel for absurdity, simply responding to cues from the outside world as they present themselves to him. Lehan observes how the clipped, matter-of-fact style of the narrative reflects this

perfectly, the sentences embodying the latent philosophy of our protagonist:

> Each passage reveals a mind at work upon immediate experience; each sentence is the statement of an empirical fact; the style here is in perfect dramatic consistency with the personality and character of the narrator. The swift movement from noun to noun, strung loosely together as the narrator concentrates on an object of immediate concern, indicates an existentialist and empirical mind at work, immersed in a moment of time. (Lehan 1960, 44)

The world around Meursault is absurd, but so is he. His thoughtless, gratuitous violence is almost akin to a natural disaster—harrowingly destructive but without conscious intent. He lives in the present moment, embracing the things that give him pleasure, not giving a second thought to those that don't. As readers we can't help but resist this perspective, just as we might be challenged and appalled by the absurd in our own lives. In our engagement with this text, we gain an experience of the absurd which is inseparable from the mind being portrayed.

But as Camus writes in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, the absurd is only the foundation for a philosophy, not the conclusion. What is so often overlooked about *L'Etranger* is the moral and philosophical ground that Meursault traverses over the course of the novel. If Meursault's abrupt, causal relation with the world was all there was to learn from this book, it would be a depressing tale indeed—and worthy of its reputation as angsty 'teen lit'. As Lehan put it, Meursault is 'an avatar, an incarnation, a personification of the absurd world … [but] Meursault is more than just an abstract symbol of gratuity and indifference, primarily because the novel is also a kind of moral progress toward self-realization and cosmic understanding' (Lehan 1964, 234). The reason that is so often missed from analyses of the novel is that a great deal of the philosophical development that Meursault undergoes is represented primarily through style. Let us take two examples from the novel to illustrate the transition between the style and philosophy of *L'Etranger*, one passage from before Meursault's conviction and one from after. Before the trial, Meursault is characterised by an unreflective, sensual engagement with the world.

Recounting a conversation with Marie, with whom he is in an intimate relationship, we are told:

> Le soir, Marie est venue me chercher et m'a demandé si je voulais me marier avec elle. J'ai dis que cela m'était égal et que nous pourrions le faire si elle le voulait. Elle a voulu savoir si je l'aimais. J'ai répondu comme je l'avais déjà fait une fois, que cela ne signifiait rien mais que sans doute je ne l'aimais pas. 'Pourquoi m'épouser alors?' a-t-elle dit. Je lui ai expliqué que cela n'avait aucune importance et que si elle désirait, nous pouvons nous marier. D'ailleurs, c'était elle qui le demandait et moi je me contentais de dire oui. Elle a observé alors que le mariage était une chose grave. J'ai répondu: 'Non.' Elle s'est tue un moment et elle m'a regardé en silence. Puis elle a parlé. Elle voulait simplement savoir si j'aurais accepté la même proposition venant d'une autre femme, à qui je serais attaché de la même façon. J'ai dit: 'Naturellement'. (Camus 2006, I: 165)[12]

As usual, the sentences in the passage are either short, or cut in half by punctuation. Meursault's sentences are abrupt, not only in recounting the episode to us, but also in responding to a proclamation of love from Marie. His sentiments betray nothing but indifference, and the entire interaction portrays a man as absurd as the reasonless universe he inhabits.

But this is only the Meursault preceding the crime. While the crime itself is meaningless, the reflection we encounter after his arrest (and even more so following sentencing) demonstrates a level of reflection hitherto unseen. Consider the following extract from the very end of the novel (which we have already looked at in terms of 'secular epiphany' in Chap. 2):

> Je me suis réveillé avec des étoile sur le visage. Des bruits de campagne montaient jusqu'à moi. Des odeurs de nuit, de terre et de sel rafraîchissaient mes tempes. La merveilleuse paix de cet été endormi entrait en moi comme une marée. A ce moment, et à la limite de la nuit, des sirènes ont hurlé. Elles annonçaient des départs pour un monde qui maintenant m'était à jamais indifférent. Pour la première fois depuis longtemps, j'ai pensé à maman. Il m'a semblé que je comprenais pourquoi à la fin d'une vie elle avait pris un 'fiancé', pourquoi elle avait joué à recommencer. Là-bas, là-bas aussi, autour de cet asile où des vies s'éteignaient, le soir était comme une trêve mélancolique. Si près de la mort, maman devait s'y sentir

> libérée et prête à tout revivre. Personne, personne n'avait le droit de pleurer sur elle. Et moi, je me suis senti prêt à tout revivre. Comme si cette grande colère m'avait purgé du mal, vidé d'espoir, devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d'étoiles, je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde. (Camus 2006, I: 212–213)[13]

Meursault the sensualist is still here, and in describing his physical sensations, so too are the short sentences, so similar to those found in Hemingway and Cain—sentences that describe the world of sensation so clearly and authentically. But Meursault has undergone a sea change. Not only is he able to reflect on and empathise with the feelings of his mother (so unlike his encounter with Marie's emotions), he is also rid of indifference. Meursault's thirst for life banishes apathy, allows him to reflect on the needs of others, and gives meaning to his world. This philosophical and moral development is embodied in the style of the passage. Unlike when Meursault describes his physical sensations in the passage, when he reflects philosophically, the sentences are far longer, for example, 'Comme si cette grande colère m'avait purgé du mal, vidé d'espoir, devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d'étoiles, je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde.' The language is also more metaphorical (e.g. 'cette nuit chargée de signes et d'étoiles', 'La merveilleuse paix de cet été endormi'). Lehan put it, 'After the murder scene, Meursault grows away from his initial character—illustrating Camus's interest at this time in the difference between man and his absurd condition, the difference between humanity and nature' (Lehan 1964, 237). In other words, Meursault grows both morally and philosophically, no longer a passive extension of the absurd; and as always, this is present in the style of the novel.

5 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to give a detailed account of Camus' stylistic venture in *L'Etranger*, as the simple prose of this novel has more complex aims than immediately meets the eye. I am by no means the first critic to cite the similarities between the style of Camus and novelists

such as Hemingway and Cain. Camus, like the American Novelists, strives for an authenticity of style that truly represents the human experience, and in such novels we are given a real sense of the fact that life is made up of everyday actions and sensations; the language used—with its short sentences and simple wording—reflects the mundane yet poignant nature of our existence. Features such as prevalent use of temporal conjunctions, or piece-by-piece adjectival descriptions, represent the form of the thoughts of Meursault, Jake Barnes, and Frank Chambers, and we experience these characters' minds and the worlds they inhabit phenomenologically.

While there are certain stylistic similarities between Camus, Hemingway, and Cain, there are also differences. Camus, unlike the others wrote in French, a language with perhaps even more room for stylistic innovation. Camus' use of the *passé composé* tense in the narration of *L'Etranger* gives the novel a certain immediacy—Meursault speaks directly to us. This choice of tense also gives the reader an impossible vantage point on Meursault's world; the *passé composé* situates the actions of the novel in the immediate past, allowing us an even closer connection with the mind of the protagonist.

But as we saw in the previous section, there is much more than stylistic innovation or a search for authenticity going on in *L'Etranger*. The simplicity and clarity championed by the American Novel gives us an opportunity to experience the world of the Other phenomenologically, as does Camus', but Camus also underpins this world with a philosophy; as Roland Barthes somewhat poetically put it, 'This transparent speech [which was] inaugurated by Camus' *L'Etranger* accomplishes a style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style' (Barthes 1972, 56–57).[14] While many read *L'Etranger* as a nihilistic text, for Camus the absurd is actually a foundation for morality; thus, Meursault's story is more than just the representation of an absurd man in an absurd world. Following his conviction, Meursault finally realises that, despite its incomprehensibility, he has the ability to find meaning in his life. This philosophical epiphany provokes Meursault to reflect, empathise, and grow morally. This realisation is manifested in a stylistic shift, a departure from the American Novel which represents Camus' true aim: to communicate a moral philosophy via textual engagement. The following chapter will

now explore a further creative dimension to Camus' philosophical innovation, one less focused on the minutiae of the text, but rather its imaginative ambiguity—that is, his use of myth, fable, parable, and allegory in communicating ethical ideas.

Notes

1. In English, 'a small trawler boat which advanced imperceptibly in the dazzling sea'.
2. In English, 'Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know' (translation in Camus 2000, 9).
3. In English, 'They'd stop talking as we went by. And behind us, the conversations would start up again'.
4. In French: 'Pourquoi Camus tient-il à ces phrases courtes? D'abord elles reflètent la vie de Meursault en rappelant de petits faits qui se suivent sans grande logique, ou qui brusquement se détachent, au lieu de couler les uns dans les autres—ce qui donnerait à la vie une unité que Meursault n'éprouve pas. On trouve donc beaucoup de simples conjonctifs et notamment des conjonctions temporelles, comme aussi un grand nombre d'adverbes de temps. Par contre dans les subordonnées il y a peu de rapports affectifs ou volontés. Ce style haché se justifie aussi sur le plan de la vraisemblance. Peut-être le lecteur ne le comprend-il pas tout de suite, mais bientôt il s'aperçoit que le narrateur est en train to retracer une période de sa vie'.
5. In French: 'En effet Meursault repasse les évènements qui l'ont conduit où il est, et, chemin faisant, il s'attarde un peu, inévitablement, sur certains autres aspects de cette précieuse vie d'homme libre que naguère il gaspillait. Un tel retour dans le passé n'évoque que les impressions les plus vives, qui pour Meursault avaient été surtout physiques. D'où des faits isolés et la répétition des mêmes thèmes: le soleil, la chaleur, la lumière, les gestes des gens et surtout leurs manies, les objets qui reluisent, les repas, la plage, et Marie. Et enfin, ce qui est simple comme la vie avant le procès, s'énonce simplement. Evidemment ceux qui veulent parler de Dieu, de l'âme et de la justice emploient de 'longues phrases' … mais pour Meursault la vie n'avait rien offert de très compliqué'.

6. In English, 'As if the great outburst of anger had purged all my ills, killed all my hopes, I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and I laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world' (translation in Camus 2000, 117).
7. In fact, as Balibar points out (1972, 104), there are several uses of the *passé simple* which are often overlooked, for example, Sunday on the balcony ('*Ceux qui revenaient des cinémas de la ville arrivèrent un peu plus tard.*'), M. Perez at the wake ('*la couleur rouge sang dans ce visage blafard me frappa. L'ordonnateur nous donna nos places.*'), and during Meursault's incarceration ('*Mais cela dura quelques mois.*')
8. In French: 'l'absurde, pris jusqu'ici comme conclusion, est considéré dans cet essai comme un point de départ'.
9. John Foley suggests that what first gave Camus the feeling of the absurd was 'the sudden and visceral awareness of his own mortality' brought on by his first attack of tuberculosis. Most of Camus' readers will know that he was not simply a cerebral man—his youth in Algeria was spent swimming in the Mediterranean Sea, playing football and chasing girls—so finding himself bed-bound in mortal suffering so suddenly seems to have been quite a shock to the system (Foley 2008, 6).
10. In French: 'Camus aurait dû savoir que, même bien intentionnée, la fin ne justifiait pas les moyens … Ce n'était qu'une question de temps avant que la mort escamotée de l'Arabe ne resurgisse et prenne une place de premier plan dans le sens accordé au roman.'
11. In French: 'D'un bout à l'autre du récit les phrases sont régulièrement courtes, ou coupées par une ponctuation étudiée qui maintient le même rythme … si efficaces soient-elles pour marquer le cours monotone de l'existence'.
12. In English, That evening, Marie came round for me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said I didn't mind and we could 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'. She didn't say anything for a moment and looked at me in silence. Then she spoke. She just wanted to know if I'd have accepted the same proposal if it had come from another woman, with whom I had had a similar relationship. I said, 'Naturally' (translation in Camus 2000, 44–45).

13. In English, 'I woke up with the stars shining on my face. Sounds of the countryside wafting in. The night air was cooling my temples with the smell of earth and salt. The wondrous peace of this sleeping summer flooded into me. At that point, on the verge of daybreak, there was a scream of sirens. They were announcing a departure to a world towards which I would now be forever indifferent. For the first time in a very long time I thought of mother. I felt that I understood why at the end of her life she'd taken a 'fiancé' and why she'd pretended to start again. There at the home, where lives faded away, there too the evenings were a kind of melancholy truce. So close to death, mother must have felt liberated and ready to live her life again. No one, no one at all had any right to cry over her. And I too felt ready to live my life again. As if the great outburst of anger had purged all my ills, killed all my hopes, I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and I laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world' (translation in Camus 2000, 117).
14. In French: 'Cette parole transparente, inaugurée par *L'Etranger* de Camus, accomplit un style de l'absence qui est presque une absence idéale du style' (although, as we will see in the next chapter, Barthes didn't always quite grasp the complexity of Camus' stylistic venture).

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4

Myths, Fables, Parables, Allegories

1 Chapter Introduction

Any reader who has encountered more than one of the works of Albert Camus will have noticed that the styles and techniques he employs vary from piece to piece, in both his literary and philosophical texts. Inspired as he was by the unusual writings of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard,[1] Camus' philosophical texts often contain curious devices such as Greek myths to illustrate his philosophical theses. Meanwhile, his literary texts themselves reveal layers of moral and metaphysical meaning, leading them in themselves to be categorised variously as fables, parables, and allegories (among other things)—the distinctions between these interpretations often being less than clear-cut. Back in 1957, John Cruickshank commented on this effect:

> The terms 'myth', 'fable' and 'symbol' are loosely and somewhat indiscriminately used… All three terms, together with those of 'allegory and parable', are treated as being virtually synonymous, particularly by European writers. In the French critical vocabulary a myth has long ceased to hold only its original meaning of a fiction embodying the actions of legendary or

G. Whistler, *Camus' Literary Ethics*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37756-4_4

> supernatural beings. It now means anything from a widely accepted ideology to a cheap catchword, and from a fable or parable to an allegory or symbol. Even the term *roman-mythe* is ambiguous in meaning and has been indiscriminately applied. In the case of Camus, for example, it has been used to describe both *L'Etranger* and *La Peste*, yet these two novels differ greatly in their form and method. (Cruickshank 1957, 62)

While Cruickshank sets out our predicament nicely, it is interesting to note that even in this passage, his interpretation of the word 'myth' is divergent from its traditional Greek use: as Plato specialist Catalin Partenie explains, 'For them a *muthos* was a true story, a story that unveils the true origin of the world and human beings' (Partenie 2014)—not something fictional, as Cruickshank says. The task of the following chapter is to examine Camus' use of such metaphorical techniques[2] within his own writing, and I will begin by setting out my own definitions of terms such as 'myth', 'parable', 'fable', 'allegory', and 'symbol', not only because a certain ambiguity is manifested with general use, but also because (as we will see) some of the most cutting critiques of Camus' work have rested on a lack of distinction between these terms.

As has already become clear, the term 'myth' can even be somewhat problematic. While the Greeks used it to refer to stories often involving spiritual or miraculous happenings, these tales were accepted as truthful—even the basis for metaphysical claims. Nowadays, the term myth is often used as loosely as to mean 'common misconception', that is, the kind of myth that can be 'busted'. As for the distinction between 'parable' and 'fable', these two terms are closely related; both can be defined as short stories containing some sort of moral lesson, and both may leave an element of ambiguity so as to engage the reader's/listener's imagination. Where they differ, however, is in their characters: the action which can lead to moral or spiritual understanding in parables occurs between humans in realistic situations, whereas fables contain forces of nature or even animals as key players in the didactic narrative. Allegory, on the other hand, often has a more direct representational relation between the elements of the narrative itself and the enclosed moral message. Where parables and fables rely on the imaginary as a didactic tool, allegories are more like extended metaphors with almost a relationship of identity

(where X is to Y as A is to B), such as in Plato's famous 'Ship of State' (Plato 2011, 488a–e), wherein the relation between a ruler and a society is taken as comparable to that of a captain to his ship. Theories of symbolism in philosophy are too numerous and contradictory to do justice to here, so I shall adopt a fairly simplistic interpretation of the word 'symbol' in this chapter—that is, an individual object or element used to represent something more profound and conceptual, such as wedding band used to represent commitment. As will be seen over the course of the following chapter, each of these terms has a place in Camus scholarship, but regrettably their distinctions and implications are yet to be fully delineated. This is what I hope to rectify here.

Accordingly, Sect. 2 will lay out a theoretical framework for the chapter. Here I draw on Lacoue-Labarthe's conception of 'fable', proposing that the enclosed analysis of philosophical method is similar to the one which I suggest informs Camus' own. Following on from this (in Sect. 3), I examine the difference between the aims of political allegories (such as those of George Orwell) and Camus' own endeavours in *La Peste*, responding to Roland Barthes' famous critique of the novel by drawing on the aforementioned distinctions between fable and allegory. The subsequent section (Sect. 4) consists in an analysis of the relationship between *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *L'Etranger* which goes beyond the stylistic analysis from the previous chapter; here I suggest that we read *L'Etranger* as a parable for the absurd and that his deployment of myth in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* aims towards a metaphysical truth worthy of the Greeks' original conception of the term. In Sect. 5 I look at Harry Slochower's 1948 essay, 'The Function of Myth in Existentialism', bringing it into dialogue with Camus' own critique of existentialism as manifested in the short story, *Le Renégat*.

2 Philosophy (and the World) as Fable

As I have claimed previously, philosophy is about truth. Whether or not the questions we are asking address the problem of truth explicitly, philosophy in all its forms strives towards knowledge and understanding. This quest becomes particularly difficult when we take into account the

fact that as humans, our perception of reality may be partial or flawed. The task of philosophy is more difficult yet when we consider language as a medium for expressing truth. Even if we have settled on the content of our claims, as I argued in Chap. 1, the way in which they are best communicated is entirely up for debate, as is apparent to anyone reading historical philosophical texts. It is in the context of these difficulties that Lacoue-Labarthe's conception of 'fable' is situated. In *Le Sujet de la philosophie*, he questions whether philosophy could ever represent absolute truths, as it is necessarily communicated by the contingent medium that is language. He asks,

> whether the dream, the desire that philosophy has entertained since its 'beginning' for a pure saying [*dire pur*] (a speech, a discourse purely transparent to what it should immediately signify: truth, being, the absolute, etc.), has not always been compromised by the necessity of going through a text, through a process of writing, and whether, for this reason, philosophy has not always been obliged to use modes of exposition (dialogue or narrative, for example) that are not exclusively its own and that it is most often powerless to control or even reflect upon. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1993, 1)

Echoing the arguments we have already seen (in Chap. 1) from Lang, Danto, and Stewart, Lacoue-Labarthe suggests that, in aiming towards 'pure saying' (i.e. an unmediated communication, not dissimilar to Barthes' concept of 'transparent writing') (Barthes 1972, 7), philosophy fails to recognise its dependency on language as a medium—a medium it can neither control nor sufficiently reflect upon. In other words, 'one cannot ask philosophy about literature as though it were a question raised 'from the outside" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1993, 2). In choosing a particular philosophical style then, we accept a whole new handicap—we adopt a mode of expression which necessarily brings with it its own assumptions and implications, besides those that are entailed in language itself. As Camus himself put it in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 'Methods imply metaphysics; unconsciously they disclose conclusions that they often claim not to know yet' (Camus 2005, 10).

Lacoue-Labarthe thus takes a strong stance, suggesting that this distinction between philosophy and literature should be recognised as false,

as neither is able to appeal to an absolute outside of its particular mode of expression. While I do not suggest that Camus' own view is as extreme, Lacoue-Labarthe sets out a fruitful area of discussion which frames Camus' own endeavours nicely. The philosophy/literature distinction in question quite naturally maps on to the classical *muthos/logos* distinction, which is in turn thrown into uncertainty; Lacoue-Labarthe writes, 'The discourse of truth, *logos*, is nothing other than *muthos*, that is, the very thing against which it has always claimed to constitute itself' (Lacoue-Labarthe 1993, 6). If we consider again that the Greeks conceived myths to be as true as reality, the lack of distinction between the two goes a long way back. As Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, '*Muthos* and *logos* are the same thing, but neither is more true (or more false, deceptive, fictional, etc.) than the other; they are neither true nor false; both are the same fable' (Lacoue-Labarthe 1993, 6). Also commenting on the *muthos/logos* distinction, Michèle Le Dœuff suggested that 'Philosophical discourse is inscribed and declares its status as philosophy though a break with myth, fable, the poetic, the domain of the image' (Le Dœuff 1989, 1), but in Lacoue-Labarthe's work we see philosophy's identity as distinct from myth (as *logos*) begin to break down. Philosophy is *muthos*, fable, and:

> Fable is the language with respect to which (and in which) these differences—-which are not differences—no longer obtain: literal and figurative, transparency and transfer, reality and simulacrum, presence and representation, *muthos* and *logos*, logic and poetry, philosophy and literature, etc. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1993, 9)[3]

I suggest that from this vantage point, we are better equipped to analyse Camus' own use of such techniques. As Le Dœuff says, 'The images that appear in theoretical texts are normally viewed as extrinsic to the theoretical work, so that to interest oneself in them seems like a merely anecdotal approach to philosophy' (Le Dœuff 1989, 2)—this is what Camus endeavours to break away from, the imagistic and metaphorical being indispensable to his philosophical aims.

While I would not suggest that Camus follows Lacoue-Labarthe and Le Dœuff in this desire to collapse the boundary between philosophy and literature entirely, I would suggest that it is evident from his stylistic

experimentation that he wishes to test this boundary, and question the efficacy of established modes of philosophical representation. An example of Camus' blurring of philosophical genres is evident in his use of 'cycles' of writing, each addressing a particular aspect of his philosophy, and encompassing a play, a novel, and an essay. He described his absurd cycle (*L'Etranger, Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, *Le Malentendu*, and *Caligula*) as having 'several parts with each section embodied with different techniques, and their results illustrate the consequences of an absurd grappling with life'.[4] In his belief that 'Certain works can illustrate one another',[5] Camus plays with the traps of genre in a way that suits his philosophical aims. As a philosopher concerned with the absurd, the ambiguities that reside at the borders between genres only serve to supplement his picture of the human condition. Thus, the conceptual understanding of the absurd which can be gained from reading *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* is supplemented and enriched by its coinciding with *L'Etranger*, the imaginative engagement elicited from encountering the creative text thereby fleshing out the abstract philosophical claims of his essay. The following sections will therefore look in more detail at Camus' use of metaphorical devices, and how they correspond to his philosophical theses.

3 Political Allegory and Abstraction as a Force of Nature

Let us now move on from this theoretical groundwork, to an analysis of perhaps the most controversial of Camus' metaphorical works, that is, *La Peste.* This novel was of course written in a time dominated by an atmosphere of censorship (due to the Nazi Occupation), in which the use of allegory became somewhat of a natural reflex, a historically conditioned habit.[6] This novel suffered numerous damning critiques from 'the French Left', the most famous of which comes from Roland Barthes. Barthes' critique rests on an objection to Camus' use of a mysterious, inhuman force of nature to represent the very real, very human evil of Nazism. As Barthes put it, 'Evil sometimes has a human face, and it is this which *La Peste* does not tell us' (Barthes 1993, 455).[7] This seems to be a reasonable

observation—surely the ethical dilemmas we face are more difficult when the perpetrators of crimes are humans too, with emotions, desires, and pain of their own? While this critique may, upon first reading, seem both justified and persuasive, I suggest that it is far less so if we consider the distinction between allegory and fable, and particularly if we emphasise the difference in aims of political allegory and metaphysical fable (as I shall expand upon presently). Meanwhile, other critics pointed out that a plague could have been used equally to represent French colonialism, attesting to Camus' ignorance of his own position as a child of this conquest. Connor Cruise O'Brien writes:

> There were Arabs for whom 'French Algeria' was a fiction quite as repugnant as the fiction of Hitler's new European order was for Camus and his friends. For such Arabs, the French were in Algeria by virtue of the same right by which the Germans were in France: the right of conquest… From this point of view, Rieux, Tarrou, and Grand were not devoted fighters of the plague: they were the plague itself. (Cruise O'Brien 1970, 55)

Again, I suggest that this critique falls short of the mark, as it is not only in need of a more careful analysis of *what kind* of representation we are dealing with in *La Peste*, but also *what exactly* it is that is being represented.[8] In order to make my claim that *La Peste* should not be read *only* as political allegory more robust, it would be prudent to examine a concrete example of political allegory—both to define this category, and set out what it endeavours to achieve.

There are many ways one can compare the work of George Orwell to that of Albert Camus; both artists are highly political, metaphorical, and linguistic perfectionists. Where they differ is that George Orwell is, in the purest sense, a political allegorist. In his 1946 essay, *Why I Write*, he describes the political purpose which inspires his writing as '[the] desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after' (Orwell 2004, 5). But Orwell was sceptical of political rhetoric; in a critique whose lineage can be traced all the way back to Plato, he tells us, 'Political language … is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind' (Orwell 2004, 120). It is for this reason that

he chooses alternative, artistic methods to put forward his own political doctrine. And so we see that political purpose spurred Orwell on more than a desire to create. He admits, 'When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art'. I write because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing' (Orwell 2004, 8). As such, his allegories leave a lot less to the imagination—the links to be made are definite, and the overarching metaphors map neatly onto the political content. One critic even went as far as to call *Animal Farm* 'Totalitarianism for Beginners' (Dickstein 2007, 134).

Orwell was always explicit about the aims of his writing. The politics behind his literature is very much a motivating factor for him. He tells us:

> Every line of serious work I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism… It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects. Everyone writes of them in one guise or another. (Orwell 2004, 8)

Of course, Camus' work is certainly political, and the political values to be found in *La Peste* are much the same as Camus is without a doubt against totalitarianism; as Orwell pointed out, 'No book is genuinely free from political bias' (Orwell 2004, 5). But what differentiates *La Peste* from pure political allegory is Camus' desire to represent something which he believes to be universal, innately human, and outside of the contingencies of changing political climates: that is, ethical rebellion—or 'revolt', as is defined in *L'Homme révolté* (and in Chap. 1 of this book). In the isolated setting of Oran, Camus demonstrates the ways in which humans must unite in the face of *un huis-clos*—this response, he suggests, should be the same in all contexts, whether it be contagion, totalitarianism, or even mortality itself.

If not merely a political allegory for totalitarianism, what is the function of 'la peste' in *La Peste*? Even characters in the novel itself interpret the significance of the sickness differently; in his first sermon, Paneloux, clutching a crucifix, even suggests (parabolically) that it is God's will

manifest, a punishment for the sins of the citizens of Oran. I would argue however that the answer to this question lies in Camus' choice of subject matter and setting. As Barthes pointed out, plagues are forces of nature, very unlike the kind of cruelty and malice humans are capable of. But as the epigraph of *La Peste* suggests (borrowed from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*), 'It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another as it is to represent anything which really exists by that which exists not' (Camus 2002, 3). This statement is at the root of all fables; morality is sometimes best understood through the ambiguous actions of impossible characters, be it the talking animals of Aesop, or the malignant microbes of *La Peste.* Nazism gained so much power by the spread of an ideology—an ideology which relied on the ability to dehumanise whole ethnic groups, turning people into an abstract threat. As Camus put it, 'Irrational terror transforms men into matter' (Camus 2000b, 152). What better way could there be of illustrating the spread of an ideology of abstraction than with an opaque and terrible contagion? As one critic writes:

> For Camus the abstractions in the name of which totalitarian governments held sway were far more dangerous and far more lethal than armies of men. Abstractions, as their survival after the Nazi defeat proved, were harder to destroy than human lives. This was one of the reasons why Camus chose the plague to represent the Nazi forces of oppression. A disease, he thought, more closely symbolized the abstractions in the name of which the Nazis had waged war. (Parker 1966, 112–113)

Unlike the Nazis, however, the plague does not single out a particular demographic—everyone is equal, and equally vulnerable. This curious levelling effect is not politically ignorant, but metaphysically evaluative—once again insisting on an ethics of solidarity in which all human lives are equally valuable, and all of us responsible in the fight against the rancorous evil of suffering and death.

But the aptness of a lethal scourge in representing Nazism is not the only level on which this fable operates. Certainly, it does work on this political level, and indeed on the interpersonal level between the characters. While the usual problems in categorisation are present in the following quote

from Cruickshank (he too chooses 'allegory' over 'fable'), he does illustrate the three levels that the novel encompasses when he writes:

> The plague … is an image which expands to universal significance through two metaphorical stages. It speaks directly of private life and indirectly of politics and metaphysics. These are the three possible levels of all human thought and experience—the personal, the social, the speculative—and in the allegory of the plague they are unified. In this way the allegory used by Camus attempts to make contact with the whole man, with the triple thinking and living of the reader. (Cruickshank 1957, 66)

While the political and personal layers of this text contribute to what makes this a great novel, and 'each level of presentation gains something by its simultaneous meaning at a different level' (Cruickshank 1957, 72), it is the ethical message at the heart of the text which is of the highest importance to Camus—we must band together and revolt against the abstractions which claim human lives.

Like the microbe itself, the confined space that Oran inhabits during the epidemic also plays an important role in bringing about the conditions for rebellion. As Camus himself put it, 'All thoughts of revolt manifest themselves in a closed universe' (Camus 2006b, III: 280)[9]—by this he means that the conditions of revolt are necessarily confided. Just like Meursault, it is only when we are imprisoned that we truly understand our innate need for freedom. Cruickshank again writes that,

> [The plague's] spatially concentrated and temporally undifferentiated character makes it a singularly appropriate vehicle for Camus's metaphysical ideas… The plague is given a confined setting which, through its very concentration and apparent narrowness, takes on a universal significance. In this way the metaphysical appropriateness of the allegory is confirmed and strengthened. (Cruickshank 1957, 71–72)

The isolated citizens of Oran are trapped in a pocket of time—the usual flow of history is at a standstill, giving their actions an air of the infinite. It is in this setting that the characters are able to access the truth that they, alone in the face of mortality, yet together as humans, must fight against this abstraction. The citizens of Oran are physically trapped,

but this only serves to illustrate the fact that we, as humans, are always metaphysically trapped. We inhabit a finite pocket in time and space, bookended by the unknown, and all we have is each other.

4 Myth and the Metaphysics of *L'Etranger*

At the centre of each of Camus' works lies a metaphysical problem. As we have already seen in the previous section, in *La Peste*, the problem is the necessity for morality in the face of death itself—not simply the dead-end of living in quarantine or the confinement of subsisting under the Occupation. But the 'Prometheus cycle' (encompassing both *L'Homme révolté* and *La Peste*) rests on a foundation already laid in the 'Sisyphus cycle'—that is, the absurd. While too many careless readers take the message at the heart of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *L'Etranger* to be a nihilistic one, as we saw in the previous chapter, this is entirely too simplistic. Yes, *Le Mythe* opens with a contemplation of suicide, and the protagonist of *L'Etranger* takes a human life on a whim, not even displaying any remorse for his actions—but too often overlooked is the very real sense of *amour de la vie* in both of these works. Evidence of this feeling can be found in both the texts, but the implications of Camus' use of the myth of Sisyphus as an answer to the absurd, and the parabolic denouement in the final scene of *L'Etranger*, are rarely given proper recognition, leaving these profound works to be relegated to the bookshelves of angsty teens rather than to be taken seriously by contemporary philosophy. In this section, then, I will endeavour to elucidate the real significance of the use of myth and parable as tools for illustrating the absurd.

Alongside Orwell, another metaphorical writer to whom Camus is regularly compared is Franz Kafka, as was mentioned in the previous chapter. Kafka had a great influence on the young Camus, and it is easy to make connections between their works. To risk stating the obvious, we might note that both wrote dreamlike, metaphorical tales which illustrate the absurdity of the human condition. As Kafka himself said of his own works, 'All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and this we knew already' (Kafka 1946, 258). Kafka himself also referred to Sisyphus in his diaries several times, but his portrayal was one of impotence

and pessimism, rather than obstinate joy, as was Camus' (Politzer 1960, 51). Camus also greatly admired Kafka's decision to approach the mysteries of the human condition through imaginative, creative texts, as opposed to the traditional philosophical form. As Camus writes in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*:

> The preference that [Kafka has] shown for writing in images rather than in reasoned arguments is revelatory of a certain thought … convinced of the uselessness of any principle of explanation and sure of the educative message of perceptible appearance. [Kafka] consider[s] the work of art both as an end and as a beginning. It is the outcome of an often unexpressed philosophy, its illustration and its consummation. (Camus 2005, 98)

Here Camus makes implicit his own rejection of the singular use of traditional philosophical methods in favour of more imagistic, metaphorical ones, thereby aligning himself with Kafka, an alignment which is of course also manifested in his use of myth in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*.

This obvious comparison has been made by many, and of course there are differences between the two writers, as well as the similarities already mentioned. While their parables both illustrate the incomprehensible, Camus' have a moral message over and above the absurdity of our encounter with the universe: we must revolt, for the sake of the Other. In other words, Kafka's Sisyphus is one of hopeless struggle, whereas Camus' is defiant, finding meaning in the very struggle itself. One might also point out that Kafka's choice of subject matter is often more surreal—patently 'fabulous'—but this fact is more superficial than some critics argue. Alice Kaplan suggests that in fact, 'The characters and episodes of *L'Etranger* are too individualised, too everyday to risk being associated with Kafka's symbols' (Kaplan 2016, 116). She suggests that metaphorical works must contain fantastic symbols, and that those of *L'Etranger* couldn't possibly refer to profound metaphysical claims outside of the plot:

> *The Stranger*, in other words, was not an allegory like *The Trial*. It was set in the most recognizable, ordinary streets of Algiers. Meursault, heading home from work to boiled potatoes, has little connection to Kafka's realm of the symbolic, only to the banal, and the bizarre. (Kaplan 2016, 116)

While her use of the word 'allegory' is as imprecise as that of so many others, her implication is clear: the world of *L'Etranger* is simply our own, with no transcendent metaphysical message.

I (and no doubt Camus) would beg to differ, however. As Camus writes in his notebooks, '*La Peste* has a social meaning and a metaphysical meaning. It's exactly the same. This ambiguity is also that of *L'Etranger*' (Camus 2006b, II: 965).[10] In other words, Meursault's actions do have social implications—his refusal to feign remorse in court though his life depends on it certainly does illustrate the absurd way in which society conducts itself. But they also have metaphysical implications. As we have already seen, in the final scene of this parable, whilst awaiting death, Meursault experiences something of a communion with the universe—an absurd epiphany of the joy of his own existence (Camus 2006b, I: 212–213). In this moment, Meursault learns something about himself and the universe that is entirely separate from the social implications of the novel—that this life is as precious as it is meaningless. This 'invincible summer' (Camus 1970, 169) he finds within himself is one he shares with Sisyphus, and thus we must imagine them both happy.

5 The Existentialist and the City of Salt

Le Renégat, the second in the collection of short stories entitled, *L'Exil et le Royaume*, is among the most divisive and striking of Camus' works. On the surface, it is the story of a French Catholic missionary whose attempt to bring Christianity to a savage tribe in Mali results in not only physical, psychological, and even sexual violence, but also his own conversion to the beliefs of the tribe (Camus 2006a, 17–30). As baffling as the text appears on first reading, it is generally accepted to be allegorical, but exactly what it is an allegory for is rarely agreed upon. One critic takes it to be simply allegorical of the process of writing (Hutcheon 1973, 67–87), while another psychoanalytic interpretation suggests that it is the tale of a 'masochist fanatic' (Costes 1973, 194); other postcolonialist readings have also suggested that it should be assessed for its 'Occidental bias' (McGregor 1993, 743). Of all the interpretations, arguably the most persuasive comes from R. R. McGregor, who makes the link between

Camus' critique of existentialism (as developed in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*) and the self-destructive trajectory of the protagonist (McGregor 1993, 743). Following McGregor, this section will therefore analyse *Le Renégat* as an allegory (unlike those misclassified texts previously examined) and analyse its use and efficacy as a means of critiquing existentialist philosophy. Harry Slochower's 1948 essay, 'The Function of Myth in Existentialism', offers a different, yet relevant criticism of existentialism; this section will therefore begin by setting out the conceptual work at the heart of Slochower's essay, before bringing it into dialogue with Camus' own analysis.

Up until this point we have only made brief reference to the philosophy of existentialism without going into any real depth on the topic, but as the current section will be investigating critiques of this philosophical movement, it would now be pertinent to take a closer look. Existentialism is a term which is often bandied about in common parlance whenever we find ourselves talking about the human experience, finitude, or authenticity. Frustrating as it can be for anyone looking to investigate this movement, this looseness in definition becomes understandable when we consider the number of diverse thinkers which are sometimes included in this bracket (such as Beauvoir, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and even Marcel). One of the most influential existentialist thinkers (and the one with which Camus no doubt most deeply engaged) was Jean-Paul Sartre, and indeed his conception of existentialism means something rather more precise than is often given credit for. At the heart of Sartre's formulation lies the principle known as 'existence before essence', which refers to the idea that we can say nothing formal about human nature (essence), because our values and identity are formulated through our conscious experience of being (existence) (Sartre 2007, 23–24). Having cleared away the wreckage of what earlier philosophers might have thought it mean to be human, existentialism leaves it to the individual to decide what to do with their newly found freedom.[11]

While Camus does not accept the principle of 'existence before essence' (according to his belief in human nature, as discussed in Chap. 2), area of existentialism which Camus' own philosophy does intersect with is his use of the concept of the absurd. While most of us will immediately think of Camus in connection with this concept, he was by no means the first

thinker to focus on it. A century earlier, Kierkegaard used the concept to describe a way of responding to existential despair, in which the believer's trust in God is manifested in a defiant struggle against this anguish. He writes, 'The absurd, or to act by virtue of the absurd, is to act upon faith, trusting in God' (Kierkegaard 1993, 291). It is already clear that Camus' approach to the absurd is somewhat different from this, but Camus' absurd is nevertheless characterised by a defiant struggle to give life meaning. Sartre also picked up the term, explaining, 'Man's existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification' (Sartre 1956, 628). Here he illuminates a key idea that he shares with Camus, that is, the absurd stems from our lack of transcendence in a godless universe.

As Ronald Srigley writes, 'The common, orthodox interpretation of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is that it endorses a type of existentialism similar to that developed by Jean-Paul Sartre' (Srigley 2011, 17), but despite the common ground that Camus shares with existentialism in terms of his use of the absurd, Camus was deeply critical of the movement. He writes of 'existentialist philosophies' that, 'All of them without exception suggest escape' (Camus 2005, 30). For Camus, the existentialists idealise the absurd to a deifying degree. While their recognition of the absurd and rejection of religion is a step in the right direction for Camus, the radical freedom they venerate is just another appeal to transcendence—they simply accept a new doctrine. Slochower's critique, on the other hand, is illustrated by a comparison to the narrative arc found in classical mythology. He explains:

> Existentialism has seized on one aspect of the literary myth and raised it to an absolute. It centers on the second stage of the myth, that which is concerned with the revolt of the individual against the mythical collective… In these literary myths, the individual challenges his authoritative communality and exercises freedom in making his personal choice. In this process of loosening, the mythical hero experiences alienation, fear, and guilt. Yet, he continues on his journey away from 'home', accepting the responsibility of his free action or his crime. (Slochower 1948, 42)

The movement in existentialist thought which Slochower here refers to is the rejection of religion. After leaving the comfort of the spiritual home

that Christianity represents in Western thought, the existentialist hero is overcome by a sense of his aloneness in the world—this is the same radical and unlimited freedom that Camus is so wary of.

Where the existentialists go wrong, Slochower suggests, is by never 'returning home'. In classical mythology, the hero returns from his epic adventure, taking with him the new experiences and wisdom which allow him to reconcile himself with the place he set out from, but with something of his own to contribute this time:

> This reconciliation becomes possible because the individual grows to awareness of the hybris in his revolt, of the dangers in an unqualified repudiation of the old. This leads to his limiting and restraining his own demon. His choice can thereby become critical and self-critical, and his responsibility ethical. Moreover, the last stage is possible only because there has been recognition of the first stage. The hero can be redeemed only because he can return 'home'. To be sure, reconciliation retains, as a dialectical moment, the element of revolt through which the mythical hero has passed. The hero does not submit or surrender. He is not redeemed by returning as a child to a collective nursery. In the third stage, the authoritative code itself has been modified by virtue of the individual challenge. That is, the hero is saved because of his revolt. (Slochower 1948, 43)

In returning home, the hero acknowledges the limits within himself and is humbled not only by his adventure but also by the wisdom of those that came before him. The existentialists, however, do not recognise 'the dangers in an unqualified repudiation of the old' and fail to gain an ethical responsibility. If the existentialists were to return 'home', this would not signify a return to Christianity, but instead the ability to appreciate the worth of at least certain elements, such as a sense of morality that should restrict freedom.

For readers familiar with Camus' *L'Homme révolté*, no doubt this is all sounding somewhat familiar. At the centre of this text is his concept of moderation ('*la mesure*'), which refers to ethics as a boundary to radical freedom (Camus 2000b, 258–260). Even Camus' conception of revolt is specifically aimed against the idea that 'nothing is forbidden' (Camus 2000b, 62). But Slochower lumps Camus in with the existentialists,

saying simply that he 'may be considered as at least related to the movement' (Slochower 1948, 42), without further examination. Of course, Slochower's essay preceded *L'Homme révolté* by several years, so Slochower cannot be blamed for not knowing the intricacies of this text, but there are clues in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* which he (like many others) fail to pick up on—perhaps the most obvious of these on the very first page, where Camus writes, 'the absurd, taken until now as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a point of departure' (Camus 2006b, I: 219).[12] These clues should be enough to set Camus well apart from the existentialists, as this indicates his desire to move on from an awareness of the absurd towards a 'third stage', comparable with the hero's return home. Slochower, however, suggests that Sisyphus himself is a suitable symbol of existentialism, his eternal damnation depriving the myth of a conclusion:

> The characteristic mythical hero of Existentialism is not Prometheus, created by his mother Terra, and finally coming to terms with Zeus, the Father, but Sisyphus. Not Prometheus who would free mankind both from fear of nature and man as well as for control of physical and human nature, but Sisyphus, forever condemned to roll a rock to the top of a mountain, with the rock always falling back of its own weight. (Slochower 1948, 44)

This suggestion could only be based on a misunderstanding of Camus' 'happy' Sisyphus; if we take the absurd as only a foundation, and we derive meaning from our struggles, there is no reason *not* to build upon it, to enter the final stage of the myth—of Prometheus, Revolt, of *la mesure*.

But how does this apply to *Le Renégat*? Well, as we see in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus suggests that the existentialists commit philosophical suicide by accepting a new doctrine, instead of living like 'The Absurd Man', who inhabits a state of authentic confrontation with the absurd. Instead of a religion, they have a philosophy, but as far as Camus is concerned, this is simply another way of escaping the absurd. The missionary in *Le Renégat* too abandons his religion, instead adopting the cruel and fetishistic one of Taghâsa, which permits all manner of violence. The existentialists thus make a doctrine out of meaninglessness, whilst refusing to reconcile themselves with their point of departure, that is, Christianity

(as we saw Camus did to a certain degree in Chap. 2). *Le Renégat* is certainly a cautionary tale of indoctrination, but what is the alternative? Slochower says that the radical freedom of existentialism,

> spells the mutilation of the myth into a process which is open at both ends. It converts the steady continuity of the myth into a disconnected series of leaps leading to death or shipwreck. Existentialism has emptied the mythical collective and transformed it into a primeval abyss. In it man begins and ends with nothing. Between the two voids lies the realm of existence whose emergence remains a mystery. In sum, it deprives the myth of its communal status and dignity. (Slochower 1948, 52)

While the existentialist, left without closure, ruins the neat arc of classical myth, Camus' myth mirrors it, with its own emphasis on reconciliation and limitation. While he does not suggest that, after confronting the absurd, one should return to the doctrinal 'home' of Christianity, he does suggest that our freedom is (and indeed should be) limited. We are not bound by an absolute God, but by a commitment to humanity in the face of absurdity. Thus Camus' absurd man 'returns home' from the absurd wasteland, bringing with him a new and authentic understanding which must be reconciled with the old, rather than overwriting it as the existentialists (and 'le renégat') do.

6 Chapter Conclusion

As we have seen once again, the methods Camus uses to approach philosophical problems are far from 'analytic'. As I have cited previously, Camus claimed that 'A novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images' (Camus 2006b, I: 794),[13] and his novels clearly demonstrate this belief—often through the use of fable, parable, or other metaphorical devices. His essays also rely on imagistic narrative and myth. It might seem strange to an academic philosopher that Camus chooses to use a myth (traditionally inseparable from religious belief) to illustrate an argument against religion, and the absurdity of the human encounter with a godless universe (as Camus does in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*). As we saw

in Sect. 2 (and indeed Chap. 1), however, the *muthos*/*logos* dichotomy is not as cut and dry as we might hope. If we accept that the line between philosophy and literature is often more blurred than we might have thought, then the relationship between truth and classical mythology is no longer so far from our own. Indeed, Camus uses fable and other metaphorical devices with an aim to uncover philosophical truths—one might even go as far as to say that myth is as metaphysically true for Camus as it was for the Greeks.

Camus' literature (despite numerous vehement critics) is widely acclaimed these days—winning a Nobel Prize is testimony to that. But the world of philosophy has long since ceased to give Camus' works much serious consideration. The things which underpin a great novel, however, are precisely the concerns of philosophy—both art and thought aim to reveal and explore the human condition, with all its ambiguities. With no such thing as *dire pur*, the idea that philosophy might be able to attain an unambiguous and unmediated understanding of life and its mysteries is more than ambitious, it may simply be misguided; it is for this reason that Camus embraces these ambiguities, and uses them as a means of illustrating the ambiguities of our own existence. Philosophical style is subject to the contingencies of fashion, but we will always turn towards writings which somehow tap into our experience of life and speak to our moral intuitions. As one critic put it:

> During those seasons when it becomes too embarrassing academically or too social-scientifically 'soft' to enter deeply into the issues of the heart, we can still turn to those odd stories with double meanings that speak to us in ways not entirely subject to management by our greater and greater hermeneutical competency (Champion 1989, 37)

and among the oldest texts we rely on as are a plethora of metaphorical works, not only in religious contexts, but also in the stories we tell our children, such as Aesop's fables or the fairy tales of Hans Andersen and the Brothers Grimm.

Whether or not we deign to call his writings 'philosophy', Camus' numerous styles situate him within an ancient tradition of these metaphorical works—be it his use of fables and parables to communicate

moral concerns (as discussed in Sects. 3 and 4), or his myths and allegories which illustrate metaphysical theories (Sect. 5). As we have seen already, the dialogue between the different genres Camus uses facilitate his philosophical aims: in accepting the ambiguity which inheres in metaphorical narrative, we come closer to accepting the ambiguity and absurdity of life itself. In other words, 'The allegory will always have a fringe of uncertainty and an aura of imprecision. In the work of art this uncertainty adds an extra dimension' (Cruickshank 1957, 65). Each of Camus' works embraces this uncertainty, thereby attempting to engage the imagination of the reader on a deeper level than logical consideration. The next chapter will examine yet another of Camus' approaches to the complexity of moral reasoning—that is, moral dialogue.

Notes

1. See *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Camus 2006b, I: 215–315) for evidence of such inspiration (in which he makes almost continual reference to both philosophers). See also Kierkegaard (1993, 167–169, 174–176) and Nietzsche (1979, 79) for examples of their own philosophical fables.
2. By 'metaphorical' I mean to refer to works encompassing allegory, myth, parable, or fable more broadly.
3. Lacoue-Labarthe formulates this in terms of fable, which makes his argument particularly pertinent to the subject of this chapter, but it is worth noting that Rorty in fact argues something similar in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Rorty 1989) which it isn't within the scope of the current volume to examine fully here.
4. Letter to his friend Claude de Fréminville, undated (translation in Todd 1998, 105).
5. Letter to André Malraux, 15th November 1941 (translation Todd 1998, 134.)
6. It is interesting to note that many names in *La Peste* are based on the names of people and places Camus encountered during one of his own periods of confinement and suffering, in a sanatorium in the French Alpes. Dr Rieux was named after a local doctor named 'Rioux'; Paneloux is adapted from the name of area, 'Le Panelier'; even Rambert is the name of a neighbourhood in nearby Saint-Etienne (Todd 1996, 321–322, translation in Todd 1998, 160).

7. In French, 'le mal a quelquefois un visage humain, et ceci, la Peste ne le dit pas'.
8. However, I will return to the issue of French colonialism in Chap. 7.
9. In French, 'Toutes les pensées révoltées … s'illustrent dans une rhétorique ou un univers clos'.
10. In French, '*La Peste* a un sens social et un sens métaphysique. C'est exactement le même. Cette ambiguïté est aussi celle de *L'Étranger*'.
11. This is not to be confused with philosophy of existence, on the other hand, which (despite sometimes being categorised as a form of existentialism) is a theory of raising levels of consciousness via subjective-existential questioning, developed by Karl Jaspers (Jaspers 1995).
12. In French, 'l'absurde, pris jusqu'ici comme conclusion, est considéré dans cet essai comme un point de départ'.
13. In French, 'Un roman n'est jamais qu'une philosophie mise en images.

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5

Dialogic Ethics

1 Chapter Introduction

By now we have seen numerous examples of Camus' innovations in the genre(s) of moral philosophy. In this chapter, we will turn to a particular method that, following Mikhail Bakhtin, I suggest he inherited from one of his greatest idols—Fyodor Dostoevsky. The works of both authors are replete with moral and philosophical dialogues; in this chapter I suggest that these dialogues are yet another innovative method of tackling ethical problems. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin identifies a quality in the writings of Dostoevsky which he called 'polyphony' (Bakhtin 1984, 6)—that is, the expression of many voices. These voices take the form of dialogue, not only between characters, but also in what he calls 'micro-dialogue', inner disputes waged by characters in and against themselves. The themes of such arguments, in Dostoevsky, are philosophical and moral (such as personal identity, guilt, suffering, death, transcendence, and the existence of God), and the resulting disputes are in many ways left unsettled, because for Dostoevsky, truth about important issues such as these is not a static thing. Identity and moral truth are borne out of the meeting of minds and perspectives: we find out who we are and

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what we believe through complex encounters with others. Dostoevsky's choice of philosophical material has led him to be considered among many as an important precursor to existentialism, which, according to Walter Kaufmann, is also characterised by a 'marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy [considering it] superficial, academic, and remote from life' (Kaufmann 1975, 12)—a dissatisfaction which Albert Camus no doubt shared. While careful readers of Camus wouldn't consider him among the existentialists, he was certainly a descendent of Dostoevsky's, not only in his subject matter, but also (as I hope to show in this chapter), in his methods. According to biographer Olivier Todd, Camus was often,

> more about morality than philosophy. And more about morality than about ethics, if morality aims at establishing rules for living, whereas ethics strives to analyse the concepts of morality, perhaps eventually a morality to be founded outside the one imposed by moral judgements … he did not want to propose any universal morality. It was difficult enough to construct one's own moral code. (Todd 1996, 293)[1]

Despite his desire to 'establish rules for living', Camus 'did not want to propose any universal morality' as it was 'difficult enough to construct one's own moral code'. If we accept Todd's account, we can already see similarities between the approaches of Dostoevsky and Camus. This tension between the need for moral guidance and the indeterminacy of right, wrong, and the self gives birth to what I will call 'dialogic ethics'. Dialogic ethics does not attempt to formulate a morality 'founded outside the one imposed by moral judgements'. Instead, it puts these judgements into dialogue with others, thereby embracing this indeterminacy.

The following chapter is in some ways a study of Camus' debt to Dostoevsky, but it will not attempt to identify all the points of agreement and divergence between these two thinkers.[2] Instead, I will use Bakhtin's notion of polyphony as a tool to elucidate Camus' attempts at finding moral truth.[3] For Camus, like Dostoevsky, dialogue functions as a way of approaching theoretical tensions and moral problems. I suggest that what both Dostoevsky and Camus want us to learn from these dialogues is a new awareness of the uncertainty of our position. They want to

demonstrate that only through reflection upon encounters with the beliefs of others (either in dialogue or 'inner dialogue') can we reach truly moral conclusions. Their brand of ethics is heterocentric—they prescribe active engagement with others as the only effective method of resolving the problems we face as humans. Naturally, the literary works of Dostoevsky and Camus offer examples of both successful and unsuccessful dialogues—instances in which polyphony effectively unearths and sculpts opposing moral concerns, and times when it doesn't. Bakhtin himself went a long way in demonstrating Dostoevsky's use of polyphony, so the present task is more to emphasise how this relates to my notion of dialogic ethics and to forge links with the work of Camus, both theoretically and textually. In the light of this aim, I will give particular attention to Dostoevsky's *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Camus' *L'Etranger* and *La Peste*. From this, I hope to show that in some cases, this kind of ethics can indeed provide fruitful contributions to moral theory and practice.

Section 2 will deal with the distinction between monology and dialogy (which we have already touched upon in this short introduction). As a means of demonstrating this distinction, I will focus on points of divergence between the narrational strategies of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and how this can be seen to relate to the concept of transcendence, a central issue for both Dostoevsky and Camus. Section 3 will examine the *function* of dialogue in polyphonic fiction and attempt to elucidate my notion of dialogic ethics. Section 4 is where we take a more thorough look at the texts themselves, drawing on examples of didactic dialogues in *La Peste*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *The Devils*. Section 5 covers Dostoevsky's and Camus' explorations of what happens when dialogue breaks down and how this effects ethical understanding, taking examples from the work of both of this chapter's key writers.

2 Monology and Dialogy

Albert Camus had only two portraits of writers hung-up in his office—Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's (Wasiolek 1977, 131). Both of these authors made an enormous impression on Camus, indeed 'he suffer[ed] from

juxtapositions with the two great Russian novelists' (Kaufmann 1961, 40), as will become clear in this section. One critic who recognises Camus' particular 'debt to Tolstoy' (Kaufmann 1961, 40) is Walter Kaufmann. He declares Camus 'Tolstoy's heir' (Kaufmann 1961, 40) due to their dealing with convergent philosophical themes, such as the confrontation with death central to both Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Camus' *La Peste* (Kaufmann 1961, 40). Though I would suggest that this argument somewhat misses the mark (for reasons which will become clear), he does identify a key conceptual difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky that points towards Camus' true philosophical allegiances—'While Tolstoy wants to prepare the kingdom of God on earth, Dostoevsky seeks the kingdom only in the hearts of men' (Kaufmann 1961, 11). In the world inhabited by Dostoevsky (and thereafter Camus), the human is alone in her struggles and cannot appeal to vertical transcendence. Transcendence in Tolstoy figures not only in his religious worldview, but also in his literary composition. His narrators are omniscient, with the ability to look into the minds of the characters and judge their motives. In Bakhtin's terms, this form of narration robs Tolstoy's characters of their voices and their ability to represent intact moral persons—Tolstoy's texts are monologic. Both the author and the reader are in a position of knowing the characters more intimately than they do themselves. From this *point de vue divin*, we are spectators to the ignorance and self-deception of the characters which, more often than not, result in fatal pitfalls.

Truth, in Tolstoy's narratives, is something objective, outside the mind and facticity of the individual. Thus he transcends his creations in a god-like manner. Also following Bakhtin, Emerson argued that:

> Tolstoyan discourse strives to rise above specific times and places, it inevitably dehistoricizes language—that is, makes it possible to value a word regardless of when it was spoken and by whom … Either Tolstoy allows a speaker to assume directly the didactic role of teacher, judge or preacher, or he presents discourse itself as something more solid and impersonal than it is—as a direct impression from life, or as something untainted by ideological preconceptions. (Emerson 1989, 158)

The literary work therefore becomes a monologic didactic text, teaching a singular moral truth which is stable and above the temporal contingencies of human lives. Perhaps the most striking of Tolstoy's judgements of this kind falls on Anna Karenina (whose tragic story hardly needs to be synopsised here). Powerless as she is to resist extramarital temptation, she is also unable and unwilling to realise the consequences of her actions before it is too late, while the author-God knows all along: 'Now for the first time Anna turned that glaring light in which she was seeing everything on to her relations with him [her lover, Vronsky], which she had hitherto avoided thinking about' (Tolstoy 1977, 732); the phrase 'hindsight is 20/20' is all too fitting in Anna's case. Bakhtin elaborates:

> The author's field of vision nowhere intersects or collides dialogically with the characters' fields of vision or attitudes, nowhere does the word of the author encounter resistance from the hero's potential word, a word that might illuminate the same object differently, in its own way—that is, from the vantage point of its own truth. (Bakhtin 1984, 7)

No character has their own truth to offer, and thus their fates are at the mercy of the author's design, and thus, monologic texts can only depict the character's world as something which can be transcended.

Of the many literary figures who deal with philosophical ideas, Dostoevsky has perhaps received the most scholarly attention of all. What is of interest to this chapter, however, is less the ideas themselves, or even what Dostoevsky's own beliefs may be, but instead his literary methods of approaching these ideas. As an opening to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes:

> The impression that one is dealing not with a single author-artist who wrote novels and stories, but with a number of philosophical statements by several author-thinkers … Dostoevsky's work has been broken down into a series of disparate, contradictory philosophical stances, each defended by one or another character. (Bakhtin 1984, 5)

This experience that Bakhtin alludes to is a product of Dostoevsky's polyphonic method. His characters adopt and reflect upon various

philosophical stances, none of which intended to simply represent the author's own beliefs, or a 'right' or 'wrong' way of thinking, 'the author speaks not *about* a character, but *with* him' (Bakhtin 1984, 63). And so, the plurality of voices in Dostoevsky's fiction gives the characters their own moral agency, imbuing their actions and ideas with the weight of real life. Unlike Tolstoy's, Dostoevsky's narrators are characters themselves, and often comparatively minor ones. The story is never told 'from the point of view of a nonparticipating 'third person'' (Bakhtin 1984, 18). By grounding all philosophical positions within characters on an equal footing, 'a new authorial position is won and conquered, one located above the monologic position' (Bakhtin 1984, 18).

If, as Dostoevsky would seem to suggest, we (as readers) are to leave our own moral convictions at the door, then how exactly are philosophical positions to be introduced to our dialogues? The key lies in 'voice'. Nealon explains how this works in polyphonic fiction:

> 'Voice' can 'de-essentialize' ethics precisely because it also highlights an emphasis on 'response': 'voicing' an opinion, for example, is not the same as 'holding' an opinion. 'Voice' becomes such an attractive concept because it is not tied essentially to one point of view; rather, one must learn to *find* one's own voice and to *hear* the voice of the other within a common social context. (Nealon 1997, 131)

Arguments can then become separate from their advocates, just as Dostoevsky's characters are independent from their creator. The independence of these voices means we are willing to engage with them and contemplate their worth, as opposed to accepting or rejecting a lesson. The resulting 'ongoing conversation of ideas … will reveal various tensions and are basically unresolvable', but amongst these voices we can 'cocreate an understanding of reality' (Sleasman 2011, 79), and a more dynamic understanding of morality.

Bakhtin writes that 'Dostoevsky was capable of representing someone else's idea, preserving its full capacity to signify as an idea, while at the same time also preserving a distance, neither confirming the idea nor merging it with his own expressed ideology' (Bakhtin 1984, 85). Indeed, in this respect, Dostoevsky was perhaps sometimes too persuasive—his

portrayal of characters was often so credible and authentic that many readers believed them to be expressing the author's own beliefs (*The Devils*, when published without Stavrogin's confession, is one example of a worldview contrary to Dostoevsky's own apparently having the last word, as is the advocation of suicide in *Diary of a Writer*). Similarly, Sartre appears to have misunderstood *L'Etranger*, thinking that Meursault's ambivalence was Camus' own, writing: 'Where is Meursault, Camus?', as if betrayed, having thought Meursault voiced Camus' own philosophical views (in Lottman, 1997, 533). Wasiolek is an example of a reader of Dostoevsky who appears to have become lost in this plurality of voices, telling us that 'Dostoevsky the man remained convinced that beauty and dignity were possible through faith and humility, but Dostoevsky the artist watched with a certain helplessness, as the world he created mangled and made grotesque what he proposed', suggesting that 'There are finally no redemptive traits in Dostoevsky's world, and he had to seek them desperately elsewhere' (Wasiolek 1977, 144), that is, in a world which transcends our own. Dostoevsky writes, 'They have grown used to seeing in everything the author's mug; I didn't show mine. And it doesn't even occur to them that Devushkin is speaking and not I, and that Devushkin cannot speak in any other way' (Dostoevsky 1883, 86)[4]—here Dostoevsky himself testifies to the idea that his characters are subjects separate from him, proving Wasiolek wrong in his assumption that Dostoevsky's creations left him helpless. Dostoevsky intended for characters like Devushkin and Stavrogin to be able to hold their own in his dialogue, without the implication that one character or another was 'right' all along.

3 Dialogic Ethics

Camus writes that, 'There are two kinds of reason, the one ethical and the other aesthetic' (Camus 2006a, II: 861),[5] and indeed his dialogic use of genre itself puts this idea into practice. As we have already seen, Camus wrote in cycles, investigating how different stylistic approaches could bring different and new understandings to a problem, and how 'certain works can illustrate one another' (in Todd 1998, 134).[6] Camus searched for truth in between different ways of writing, creating, and thinking. Camus'

ideas and works were 'invigorated by this internal dialogue' (in Todd 1998, 134)[7]; for Camus, discrepancies we find in our moral schemes fuel the debate necessary for reflective, dialogic, and moral engagement. He also claimed that, 'Art cannot be a monologue' (Camus 2006a, IV: 254)[8] and, in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, that 'True artists scorn nothing: they are obliged to understand rather than judge' (Camus 2006a, IV: 240).[9] Accordingly, the narrators of dialogic texts never 'judge absolutely', and do not 'arbitrarily divide reality into good and evil' (Camus 2006a, IV: 261),[10] and so the characters in such works are left unfinished: uncondemned. Thus, 'the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero' (Bakhtin 1984, 63) take precedence—it is never too late, and each character is allowed its contrasting facets, both vices and virtues. As Bakhtin put it:

> The consciousnesses of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed, defined as objects or as things—one can only *relate to them dialogically*. To think about them means to *talk with them*; *otherwise they immediately turn to us their objectivized side*: they fall silent, close up, and congeal into finished, objectivized images. (Bakhtin 1984, 63)

Characters must therefore become subjects, deserving understanding and respect. Thus, '*The author can juxtapose only a single objective world—a world of other consciousnesses with rights equal to those of the hero*' (Bakhtin 1984, 49–50),[11] and we are encouraged to take a leaf from their book.

This brings us to the problem of the pedagogic value of literature—if, as Dostoevsky appears to suggest, we cannot rely on our own convictions, is it not problematic to produce didactic texts? Does Dostoevsky contradict himself by simply promoting his own conviction that morality has no transcendent value? Bakhtin too was wary of texts with pedagogical functions:

> In an environment of philosophical monologism the genuine interaction of consciousnesses is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well … Someone who knows and possesses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it and in error; that is, it is the interaction of a teacher

> and a pupil, which, it follows, can be only a pedagogical dialogue. (Bakhtin 1984, 81)

The issue at stake is how learning can be encouraged without the adoption of a monologic position of authority. This problem is only fixed by dialogic praxis. We are not attempting to reach a conclusion through discourse (as in Plato's dialogues), but we are attempting to discover a truth that is in its essence dialogic, up for debate. Camus himself was well aware of this tension, telling us, 'I don't claim to teach anybody' (Camus 1970, 352), whilst, as John Krapp, author of *An Aesthetics of Morality*, writes, he would 'admit to broadcasting common human experiences, judging them according to his standards, and then challenging his readers to develop a critical moral consciousness in response to their own social conditions' (Krapp 2002, 76). Once again, the distinction lies in the mode of delivery—the difference between right and wrong is not taught but developed collectively; the only wisdom that is to be imparted is that other voices can offer wisdom too. Krapp explains that, 'Voices have the potential to be pedagogic, but they need not be entirely unreceptive to the morally instructive influence of other voices with whom they are drawn into tension; they necessarily represent an ethical position, but the position they represent cannot always be dismissed as monologic' (Krapp 2002, 28). In Bakhtinian terms, it is these 'dialogic overtones' which give voices the potential to be both pedagogic and dialogic.

In essence then, dialogic ethics is methodological—it is less a question of '*what* morality' than '*how* morality'. We are left with a firm notion of the author's beliefs about morality, and we are even given the impression that their texts are meant to be didactic. What is being proposed to us is not, however, any suggestion of objective right or wrong—it is a suggestion of how readers should think about and engage with moral problems. Bakhtin writes, 'To affirm someone else's 'I' not as an object but as another subject—this is the principle governing Dostoevsky's worldview' (Bakhtin 1984, 10), and this focus on the Other makes his dialogues *inherently* ethical, as the two sides of a dialogue must be moulded in response to the Other. In a sense, there is a *moral of the story*, but the lesson here is not how to behave morally, but how to approach morality—we are impelled to reflect dialogically upon ethical problems. Coincidental

conflicting and contrasting philosophical standpoints mean that the nature of the problem in question becomes fluid and relative, not tied to any transcendent meaning; dialogue is therefore 'a source of non-propositional knowledge characteristic of moral understanding' (Gosling 1995, 308). By changing our understanding of the nature of philosophical and ethical problems to one more focused on the Other, dialogue can provide moral guidance despite the absence of moral certainty in life.

4 Didactic Dialogues

Dostoevsky's literary compositions are about ideas—but these ideas are not treated in isolation, nor are they dissected through sterile argumentation: instead these texts depict ideas *in* and *in between* the human minds that grapple with them—they depict 'the interaction of consciousnesses in the sphere of ideas' (Bakhtin 1984, 32). The following section will therefore examine the way that these ideas are grappled with, not only in Dostoevsky's work, but also in Camus'. To begin with, let us take, for example, Ivan Karamazov's famous dialogue with Alyosha on the problem of suffering—'Nowhere does Ivan hint at anything resembling a philosophical *argument* from suffering to a conclusion that Christianity is false or highly improbable', as one critic points out (O'Connor 2009, 176). Instead, through internal and external dialogue, we are flung between Ivan's (and Alyosha's) emotions and ideas, from his abstract rejection of transcendence—'I personally still do not accept this world' (Dostoevsky 1970, 283)—to his heart-rending image of a 'martyred little girl who beat her breast with her tiny fist, shedding her innocent tears' (Dostoevsky 1970, 295). Ivan does not reject the idea of salvation because of a lack of belief; concepts are inseparably fused with human emotions and experiences, and instead we are told, 'No, I want no part of any harmony; I don't want it, out of love for mankind. I prefer to remain with my unavenged suffering and my unappeased anger—*even if I happen to be wrong*' (Dostoevsky 1970, 295). Ivan's rejection of a world of suffering is not motivated by strict reason, but love's interference with reason. Ivan's protest is a product of his encounter with Alyosha's ideas, as well as his inner warring voices, both logical and emotive.

Camus too 'saw the saving principle as a descent from the elevations of reason and idealization to a real world of contingency and flux' (Wasiolek 1977, 132). Following the horrific events of the Second World War, Camus wrote, 'If everything is logical then everything is justified … If one cannot accept the suffering of others, then something in the world cannot be justified, and history, at one point at least, no longer coincides with reason' (Camus 2000b, 152). Here and elsewhere (as we saw in Chaps. 1 and 2) he demonstrates his belief that ethical matters such as human suffering cannot be addressed with reason alone. Rieux in *La Peste* carries Ivan's mantle and 'rejects the world as it is' (Camus 2000b, 260), refusing to believe that 'the love of God … can reconcile us to suffering and the deaths of children' (Camus 2002, 228). Just as Ivan's ideas take shape in dialogue with Alyosha, Rieux's thoughts are bounced off Paneloux, both in direct dialogue with him and internally. Dunwoodie points out that Rieux is dedicated to modesty as opposed to absolutes (Dunwoodie 1996, 101), and here he has touched upon this issue of transcendence. Without appealing to something outside of itself, life is left unfinished, even at its end. There is no all or nothing for 'modest' Rieux, as there is for his absolutist interlocutor, Paneloux. But despite being believers themselves, neither Alyosha nor Paneloux can accept the suffering of children, and Alyosha's 'No, I would not' (Dostoevsky 1970, 296) is echoed in Paneloux's 'My God, save this child!' (Camus 2002, 168). These are ethical conclusions drawn from dialogues between opposing philosophical stances, reflecting truths borne out of a communion of consciousnesses, and demonstrating that 'moral dialogue provides an aesthetic paradigm for the way moral consciousness may be developed and nourished in the competition among ethical positions' (Krapp 2002, 33).

Along with the inadequacy of pure reason, the dangers of abstraction in ethical matters are also dealt with by these writers, most notably through Rieux in *La Peste* and Kirilov in *The Devils*. As we saw in the previous chapter, the allegorical side of *La Peste* does not simply represent the 'Nazi forces of oppression', but instead the 'abstractions in the name of which the Nazis had waged their war' (Parker 1966, 112–113), and in Rieux's fight against 'the plague of abstraction' (Wasiolek 1977, 134), he realises that to overcome it, 'one must come to resemble it a little' (Camus 2002, 71). But just as Kirilov's willingness to take the blame for the

murder of Shatov turns him into the ambivalent God he hates (Allan 2014, 10), we can take our abstract ideas too far. Kirilov was once able to 'feel' his ideas (Dostoevsky 2004, 242), but he loses sight of this visceral type of contemplation. Rieux must therefore keep in mind that 'only a constant and acute attentiveness and consciousness to one's fellow man's fate can dissipate the plague' (Wasiolek 1977, 134). Elsewhere in *The Devils*, Dostoevsky gives a somewhat satirical nod towards the obscuring effect of the application of abstract principles to human happiness, in this case the tension between happiness and free will. He does this through the voice of Shigalyov, who proposes,

> to divide humanity into two unequal parts. One-tenth is to be granted absolute freedom and unrestricted powers over the remaining nine-tenths. Those who give up their individuality and be turned into something like a herd, and by their boundless obedience will by a series of regenerations attain a state of primeval innocence, something like the original paradise. (Dostoevsky 2004, 405)

This *reductio ad absurdum* is testimony to Dostoevsky's views on dealing with ethical matters. Each individual's needs must be respected—human beings are subjects that should never be treated as a herd, and morality cannot function on abstract principles alone.

Even the tension between Camus' concepts of the absurd and revolt is put into focus through dialogue. Tarrou represents the voice of the absurd, even suggesting that the plague 'has a good side; it opens men's eyes and forces them to take thought' (Camus 2002, 125). Whilst this nihilistic stab at the unreflective nature of society carries its own weight, it is not left without a rejoinder. Rieux voices revolt in the face of this sickness, and whilst his doggedness is worthy of Sisyphus himself, knowing that his 'victories will always be temporary', as Tarrou tells him (Camus 2002, 98), his struggle is an ethical one. Rieux responds plainly, 'For the moment I know this, there are sick people and they need curing. Later on, perhaps, they'll think things over; and so shall I. But what's wanted now is to make them well. I defend them the best I can, that's all' (Camus 2002, 127). Instead of giving up the fight, Rieux hopes to give people the chance to live another day and perhaps then to reflect. Rieux's

struggle affirms the rights of the Other, despite the absurdity of our condition, exemplifying the spirit of Camus' own *cogito*—'I revolt, therefore we are' (Camus 2006a, III: 79).[12] Similarly, Rambert, who initially wants to escape the quarantine to be with his lover, despite the risk of contagion and the selfishness entailed in abandoning so many to suffering, is persuaded in dialogue with Rieux and Tarrou of the value of solidarity—and he too decides to fight the plague in the name of the Other (Camus 2006a, II: 148).

Certainly, these works are about ideas, and they do indeed contain a moral message, but as we have seen, that message is a proposed method of dealing with ethical issues. Also appropriating Bakhtin's notion of 'voice', John Krapp says that '*The Plague* illustrates less a thematic moral lesson than a paradigm for the way moral consciousness may be developed and nourished aesthetically in the conflict between ethical voices' (Krapp 2002, 98), and this is exactly right. In this respect, I think that Krapp himself has hit upon the basis of dialogic ethics. Even though some of the characters have been accused of simply representing Camus' own beliefs (such as Rieux and Tarrou),[13] *La Peste* nevertheless 'illustrates the way even characters with the same basic sense of human responsibility express their commitment in different and evolving ways as a result of the idiosyncratic material and ideological pressures by which they are informed' (Krapp 2002, 33), and the novel revolves around numerous dialogues on moral responses to separation, freedom, and transcendence, among other themes. The real purpose of dialogue in *La Peste* is to lay emphasis on its power to bring about intersubjective comprehension, and to criticise it for espousing Camus' beliefs 'would be to risk condemning it for moralizing, which is exactly where it is strongest' (Spender 1948, 1). But Camus is not preaching any moral code, any objective right and wrong, except the idea that ideological tensions 'may be assimilated and refined into a methodological principle for producing contingent ethical truth claims in the material world' (Krapp 2002, 33).

5 Failures of Dialogue

Dialogue 'requires the flourishing of many voices' (Isaac 1992, 123–124), and up until now we have only looked at how this can be an effective means of approaching moral problems. In the examples of dialogic ethics that we have examined, 'The consciousness of a character is given as someone else's consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness' (Bakhtin 1984, 7), that is to say, in cases such as these, characters are in themselves subjects. But of course, as humans, we encounter failures of communication every day, and if we accept the testimony of these authors, only through understanding the Other can we make truly ethical decisions. This section will therefore look at how these writers represent ineffective communication and the breakdown of dialogue—instances in which characters become objects both to each other and to the reader. Specifically, I will focus on Dostoevsky's Myshkin from *The Idiot* and Mitya from *The Brothers Karamazov*, as well as Camus' Meursault from *L'Etranger*, Jean-Baptiste Clamence from *La Chute*, and Jan from *Le Malentendu*.

A fundamental theme of *The Idiot* is 'the impossibility of expressing an idea directly into words' (Feuer Miller 1981, 205), and this comes across nowhere more clearly than in the character Myshkin, who often frets that his 'words are incongruous, not befitting the subject, and [that] that's a degradation for those ideas' (Dostoevsky 1981, 332). Myshkin's mistake which makes the expression of his ideas impossible is that his communication is monologic. Indeed the prince admits, 'Perhaps I have a notion of instructing' (Dostoevsky 1981, 56)—a sentiment that doesn't bode well for dialogic equality. Myshkin refuses to interpret the meaning of his parables, because of his belief that 'in order adequately and responsibly to judge another individual, we should understand that person from within, know everything about them, in order to respond to them as lived actualities' (Cascardi 1986, 131–132)—this is something he is unable to do even of the fictional characters in his parables. Myshkin's moral standards are admirable, but sadly inconsequential, as he fails to enter into dialogue with other characters, characters of different moral standpoints. Despite

his belief in the unfinalisability of the human, Myshkin's moral message does not anticipate a dialogic 'rejoinder' and is consequently not heard.

It was Sartre who first pointed out the similarities between Myshkin and Meursault, noting that both are 'innocent', causing scandal through not playing by the rules of the game. According to him, this is what makes them both '*étranger*' (Sartre 1947, 104). Though Meursault would never profess to morally instruct, there are many points of resemblance between him and Myshkin. They are both thwarted by their 'basic inability to acclimate [themselves] to the text's unstable social relations' (Krapp 2002, 138). Just as Meursault is unable to resort to insincere sentimentalism in court (indeed, it doesn't even seem to occur to him that inauthentic communication is an option), 'Myshkin appreciates the separation between his and others' modes of expression, he does nothing to modify the referential expectations of his voice to accommodate circumstantial pressures' (Krapp 2002, 146). Camus knew the value of true dialogue, the kind 'between people who remain what they are and speak their minds honestly' (Camus 2006a, II: 471),[14] and although Myshkin and Meursault are too honest for their own good, their interlocutors are not so candid—they know the rules of society's games. Meursault's voice becomes impotent—he tells us, 'Mixing up my words a bit and realizing that I sounded ridiculous, I said quickly that it was because of the sun. Some people laughed' (Camus 2000a, 99). Unlike him, his accusers are skilled in the art of deceptive language and are able monopolise on linguistic devices to shield themselves from participating in honest dialogue, and consequently Meursault is told 'in bizarre language that I am to have my head cut off in a public square in the name of the French people' (Camus 2000a, 107). Myshkin and Meursault are moral centres that provoke reflection through their inability to communicate effectively; both are martyrs for their principles.[15]

Dostoevsky's belief in the unfinalisability of the human found its expression in many places, and as we have just seen, it is espoused by Myshkin. It is also present in the teachings of Elder Zosima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, who advises, 'Above all, remember that you cannot be anyone's judge. No man on earth can judge a criminal until he understands that he himself is just as guilty as the man standing before him' (Dostoevsky 1970, 387), paraphrasing the moral message of the parable

in John 8:3–11, 'The Adulterous Woman' (as mentioned in Chap. 2 in relation to Camus' short story of the same title). Those who judge others fail to recognise the dialogic nature of the human being, and it is not just Myshkin and Meursault who fall victim to eager judges. Mitya (Dmitry) Karamazov suffered a similar fate—he is considered by most to be guilty because he fits the profile of a murderer, and in the eyes of his judges, his previous deeds define him—much like Meursault's being judged for 'burying his mother like a heartless criminal' (Camus 2000a, 93). As Bakhtin put it:

> All who judge Dmitry are devoid of a genuinely dialogic approach to him, a dialogic penetration into the unfinalized core of his personality. They seek and see in him only the factual, *palpable definitiveness* of experiences and actions, and subordinate them to already defined concepts and schemes. The authentic Dmitry remains outside their judgment. (Bakhtin 1984, 62)[16]

Thus, through their failures to engage others in dialogue, Mitya, Myshkin, and Meursault lose their voices, becoming objectified.

Camus too offered cautionary tales for those who feel it in their power to judge others, owing to his belief that 'guilt and condemnation imply judges and a height from which man can be judged. But, for Camus, there is, and can be, no height above man' (Wasiolek 1977, 136). *La Chute* is an exploration of the connection between transcendence and judgement. The story of the protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, is a demonstration of monologic dominance, and he is unafraid to admit to his own feeling of superiority. He confesses: 'I have never felt comfortable except in lofty places. Even in the details of daily life, I needed to feel above' (Camus 2006b, 23). Clamence assumes for himself an almighty position, having 'recognized no equals' (Camus 2006b, 48). Before his own personal 'fall', Clamence 'held a transcendent view of himself' (Wasiolek 1977, 135), due to his supposed moral superiority. After he has recognised his own guilt, he embraces selfishness, rather than perceiving these conflicting aspects of himself in dialogic relation. His earlier professed moral superiority dissolves into the narcissism at its core, and in assuming the role of 'judge-penitent', he continues 'to love [him]self and to make use of others … Once more [having] found a height' (Camus 2006b, 141–142).

Whilst *La Chute* is, in an important respect, monologic (we do indeed only encounter the voice of Clamence), the issue of polyphony is somewhat complicated in this work. Formally, *La Chute* is really quite different from Camus' other novels; it consists of a series of long, rambling monologues by a stranger in a bar in Amsterdam. In this novel, however, there is what we might call 'implicit dialogue'—Clamence addresses the reader as 'you', and we are forced into the position of a silent interlocutor. He thus proceeds to divulge his sins and misdeeds (which are of course many and various). In his sinful revelations, Jean-Baptiste Clamence is reminiscent in many ways of the unnamed narrator of *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky 2009), and as one critic writes:

> The soliloquy with a silent interlocutor was not invented by Camus. This one was first found in *Notes from Underground* … There is however a difference: Clamence addresses a single interlocutor, the 'speaker' of the Underground addresses a crowd to the public. So we do not find there the silent and definite interlocutor that is the originality of *La Chute*. (Bloch-Michel 1962, 14–23)[17]

But Clamence is entirely more charismatic and theatrical, and another critic notes, 'Camus will have taken care to transform the monologue of his great predecessor into a theatrical text, and to subject the moods of Dostoevsky to the requirements of a controlled narrative, even to his artifice. We are far from soliloquy with a mute interlocutor' (Abbou 2009, 61).[18] Clamence, a self-appointed 'judge-penitent' is a captivating narrator—he is witty, conspiratorial, and domineering—even the activity of reading the novel gives the reader a feeling of submission to a stronger will. The narrator addresses us directly, putting words in our mouths ('You must be in business? More or less? Excellent reply') (Camus 2006b, 6), and responding to questions we are not sure we have asked ('I do appreciate your curiosity. Yet there's nothing extraordinary about my story. I'll tell you, since you want to know') (Camus 2006b, 27). While the purpose of soliloquy in the theatre is traditionally to let the audience in on the speaker's conceit, Clamence's soliloquy is precisely the opposite—mock sincerity usurping true dialogue. As Sleasman pointed out, 'The writing style chosen by Camus to tell this story greatly emphasizes

the necessity of dialogue through the very absence of dialogue' (Sleasman 2011, 20). This effect is a powerful one—the reader is swept along effortlessly, and beguiled into commiserating with this supposedly frank and unflinching confession.

Camus also explores the problem of monologism in the play *Caligula*, which 'provides insight into the implications of excessive power exercised in a monologic fashion' (Sleasman 2011, 91). Caligula takes his reasoning to its extremes, resulting in tyranny. Through his negative example, Camus' own suspicion of the dogma of reason comes across. With his determination 'to be logical, right through, at all costs' (Camus 1984, 8), Caligula is reminiscent of a utilitarian thought experiment gone wrong. His soliloquies reveal his own preoccupation with judgement, when he asks, 'Who can condemn me in this world where there is no judge, where nobody is innocent' (Camus 1984, 103). Whilst Camus' dialogic ethics suggests that we should not judge others, he does not follow it through to the conclusion (as Caligula does) that everything is permitted. Only in discussion with Cherea is he at all able to enter into true dialogue (e.g. Camus 2006a, I: 33)—but Caligula's nihilism means that even this dialogue is often less than sincere. It transpires that Caligula's own reflection is his only true confidant—in what might be taken to be internal dialogues in front of a mirror, the emperor engages in at least a degree of introspective discourse—even if he is unable to take this dialogism and apply it to his rule.

Thus Camus' tragic characters all come to ruin through failures of dialogue. Jan, the unfortunate hero of *Le Malentendu*, is perhaps the most tragically monologic of all—the entire action of the play revolves around Jan's plot to withhold dialogue, and this spells his ultimate ruin. Camus contemplated the message that comes across from this failure of dialogue in his notebooks:

> If the hero of *Le Malentendu* had said: 'There you go. It's me and I am your son,' the dialogue would have been possible and there wouldn't be crossed wires as there are in the play. There would not have been tragedy because the height of all tragedies is the deafness of the heroes … What balances the absurd is the community of men fighting against it. And if we choose to serve that community, we choose to serve the dialogue brought to the

> absurd against any politics of falsity or silence. (Camus 2006a, II: 1039–1040)[19]

We can see here the role he pictured dialogue to play in ethical contemplation—only in dialogic relationships can we look out for ourselves and others. In this section we have looked at the results of breakdowns of dialogue and seen what happens if we 'fail … to realize that a primary goal of ethical communication is to be understood' (Sleasman 2011, 127). But like successful dialogues, failures of dialogue have a role to play in dialogic ethics, they 'nonetheless provide a formidable structural model of how *not* to investigate, develop, or pronounce upon moral concepts. In short, such voices teach through what is characteristically their failure' (Krapp 2002, 31).

6 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has endeavoured to illuminate the ethical core of Bakhtin's notion of polyphony, and in this light, demonstrate that Camus (at least in part) adopted this kind of dialogue as a means of doing philosophy. We have seen the stark difference between monologic narrative (in this case Tolstoy's), and more dialogic approaches. Dostoevsky 'thrived on turbulent ambiguities and contradictions' (Davison 1997, 7), because of this fact, no transcendent authorial position would suit the aims of his fiction: Dostoevsky wanted to make a kind of sense of ethical matters that truthfully represented the contradictions of the human experience—that is, dialogic sense. As Sutherland put it, 'The exploration of major ideological and metaphysical situations was for Dostoevsky inevitably dialogical: the issues at stake could not be resolved within a single conscious and consistent outlook' (Sutherland 1977, 137). We then launched into my own notion of dialogic ethics, something which perhaps several critics (Bakhtin, Krapp, and Sleasman) have come close to hitting upon. Whilst Dostoevsky does not preach a strict moral code, he does try to promote a firm ethical belief of his own—that morality should be approached dialogically, giving an equal footing to those that participate. This move away from the abstractions of philosophical methods thus

enables us to consider ethical problems as they present themselves to us, amidst the myriad voices and possibilities of humanity. Dostoevsky tells us that there is no firm ground in morality, and so our approach to the decisions we must make must be dialogic.

I have also tried to show how important Dostoevsky's polyphonic fiction was in the development of Camus' own philosophical venture. It is no big secret that Camus was a great admirer of Dostoevsky, but often this is attributed to their joint preoccupation with certain philosophical ideas, such as death, faith, suffering, and so on (which has of course resulted in them both being associated with the existentialist movement). The influence that I have endeavoured to uncover in this chapter, however, lies more in method than content—just like Dostoevsky's, Camus' use of dialogue 'makes us understand that the plot and the characters give off a philosophy which has nothing to do … with the superimposed discourse of the author' (Rey 2000, 72).[20] Also borrowing Bakhtin's terms, Davison touched upon the fact that 'Camus's work is informed by a spirit of debate and dialogue engendered by his crucial encounter with the challenging world of Dostoevsky' (Davison 1997, 8), and indeed this is true. It is also true that both Dostoevsky's and Camus' works contain the 'bold assertion' of the necessity of a 'commitment to others' (Jones 1975, 112)—they are, in a sense, ethical projects. But these claims still fail to shed light on the implicit claim of dialogic ethics—that moral matters should be approached dialogically, as moral truth can only be understood intersubjectively. We have seen by now that Camus did indeed adopt this approach, and in these texts, just like in Dostoevsky's, 'the characters are responsible for their actions. They are moral agents' (Palmer 1992, 110).

Camus was a moralist. The values at the core of his morality are hardly controversial—compassion, tolerance, and so on—but the methods he employs to promote them are what redeems them from being just another 'moral of the story'. Certainly, Camus believes in the value of such concepts, but he shows that there is no one true way of upholding them when there is no firm agreement amongst the plurality of voices. Camus follows Dostoevsky in the belief that methods which include a more holistic picture of the intersubjective state of play are more fitting to the complex nature of morality. Literary dialogue is one such method. Dialogue functions in these works not as an end in itself, but as a means

of doing philosophy. The arguments that characters engage in are philosophical arguments; they do not endeavour to uncover a single, rational truth, but instead an intersubjective experience of an ethical problem. After all, moral dilemmas would not arise if we could all agree on a solution, so the dynamic state of 'un-resolution' that a problem inhabits during such arguments and dialogues gives a more accurate picture of morality. The paradoxical nature of morality, when approached through such a framework, does justice to every voice that is willing to take part in the dialogue. And just like the unresolvable conflict which lies between Dostoevsky's own voice and those of his characters, this 'is a paradox … which doubtless Dostoevsky would have been happy to accept' (Sutherland 1977, 138). Thus, these authors frame ethical problems in a way that encourages multiple approaches to be evaluated and reflected upon. Their logic of morality is a dialogic one, where ethical truth is dynamic, nuanced, and contingent.

Notes

1. Translation in Todd (1998, 142–143).
2. Two informed and comprehensive examples are already offered by Davison (1997) and Dunwoodie (1996), both of which I will make brief reference to later.
3. Benoît Dufau also applies Bakhtin's concept of dialogue to the work of Camus, but he only applies it to *La Chute*, and while he offers an interesting study of the illusion of dialogue in the novella, he fails to address the philosophical implications of Camus' use of dialogue (Dufau 2013, 101–116).
4. Translation Bakhtin (1984, 204).
5. In French, 'C'est que deux raisons: l'une éthique, l'autre esthétique.'
6. Letter from Camus to André Malraux, 15th November 1941.
7. Same letter to Malraux, 15th November 1941.
8. In French, 'L'art ne peut pas être un monologue'.
9. In French, 'les vrais artistes ne méprisent rien; ils s'obligent à comprendre au lieu de juger'.
10. In French, 'S'il jugeait absolument, il partagerait sans nuances la réalité entre le bien et le mal'.

11. His emphasis.
12. In French, 'Je me révolte, donc nous sommes'.
13. Olivier Todd suggested that Camus was 'present, barely disguised' in both of these characters (Todd 1996, 330).
14. In French, 'le monde a besoin de vrai dialogue … entre des gens qui restent ce qu'ils sont et qui parlent vrai.
15. An example of fruitful dialogue in *L'Etranger* in fact occurs between Meursault and the priest who visits his cell. While the priest fails to give an inch in his own contributions to the dialogue, for Meusault, the very fact of encountering his contrasting perspective is enough to help crystallise his own (Camus 2006a, I: 208–213).
16. His emphasis.
17. In French, 'Le soliloque avec un interlocuteur muet n'a pas été inventé par Camus. Celui-ci l'a d'abord trouvé dans *Ecrit dans un souterrain* … Il y a cependant une différence: Clamence s'adresse à un seul interlocuteur, le 'parleur' du *Souterrain* s'adresse à une foule vague, au public. On ne trouve donc pas là l'interlocuteur muet et défini qui fait l'originalité de *La Chute*'.
18. In French, 'Camus aura pris soin de transformer le discours monologué de son grand devancier en un texte théâtralisé, et de soumettre les humeurs dostoïevskien aux exigences d'une narration contrôlée, jusqu'en ses artifice. Nous sommes bien loin du soliloque avec un interlocuteur muet.'
19. In French, 'Si le héros du Malentendu avait dit: 'Voila. C'est moi et je suis votre fils', le dialogue était possible et non plus en porte à faux comme dans la pièce. Il n'y avait plus de tragédie puisque le sommet de toutes les tragédies est dans la surdité des héros … Ce qui équilibre l'absurde c'est la communauté des hommes en lutte contre lui. Et si nous choisissons de servir cette communauté, nous choisissons de servir le dialogue jusqu'à l'absurde contre toute politique du mensonge ou du silence'.
20. In French, 'il nous fait comprendre que l'intrigue et les personnage dégagent une philosophie qui n'avait que faire, dès lors, d'un discours surimposé de l'auteur'.

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6

Absurd Theatre: *Caligula* and Beyond

1 Chapter Introduction

At this late stage in the current volume, I hope by now to have demonstrated effectively some of the numerous rhetorical techniques that Camus utilised in his ground-breaking moral philosophy. While I have suggested that these advances have largely gone unnoticed in the world of contemporary philosophy, there is of course evidence of his recognition and influence in the literary sphere. The following chapter will examine a strand in twentieth-century literature which certainly takes up Camus' mantle in terms of 'doing moral philosophy' by creative means—that is, the movement known as the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. This term was coined by Martin Esslin in his 1961 essay of the same name, and it is used to refer to the stylistic innovations of a number of artists (including Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Adamov, and Genet) who, according to Esslin, have 'renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; [their work] merely *presents* it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images' (Esslin 2015, 6). The innovativeness of the Theatre of the Absurd is thus motivated by the desire to break free from the clichés of language and art into something more authentic. As such, plays by these writers

G. Whistler, *Camus' Literary Ethics*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37756-4_6

that contain images which convey the *feeling* of the absurd—not just its theoretical understanding. He writes:

> In the Theatre of the Absurd, the spectator is confronted with the madness of the human condition, is enabled to see his situation in all its grimness and despair. Stripped of illusions and vaguely felt fears and anxieties, he can face this situation consciously, rather than feeling it vaguely below the surface of euphemisms and optimistic illusions. By seeing his anxieties formulated he can liberate himself from them … It is the unease caused by the presence of illusions that are obviously out of tune with reality that is dissolved and discharged through liberating laughter at the recognition of the fundamental absurdity of the universe. (Esslin 2015, 350)

Tragedy and comedy are thus two sides of the same coin in this kind of theatre, and this confrontation between humans and our mortal condition is cathartic—watching this kind of play allows us to witness the world in all its madness, and nevertheless see the hilarity of it.

Esslin credits Camus with having formulated the conceptual foundation for this kind of theatre, citing Camus' own remarkably theatrical definition of the absurd: 'This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity' (Camus 2005, 4–5). This lineage has rightly been observed by numerous scholars, such as Sophie Bastien, who suggests that 'the authors of the theatre of the Absurd are perhaps those who have benefited from Camus' thought in the most positive way' (Bastien 2007, 89).[1] Esslin points out that 'the plays we are concerned with here pursue ends quite different from those of the conventional play and therefore use quite different methods' (Esslin 2015, 4)—much like (as I have argued throughout this volume) Camus' philosophical venture. However, Esslin claims that Sartre and Camus,

> differ from the dramatists of the Absurd in an important respect: they present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd

> goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed. In some senses, the *theatre* of Sartre and Camus is less adequate as an expression of the *philosophy* of Sartre and Camus—in artistic, as distinct from philosophic, terms—than the Theatre of the Absurd. (Esslin 2015, 4)

And Esslin is by no means alone in this respect. Another critic who shares this belief is Geneviève Serreau, who writes, 'Moralists before playwrights, [Sartre and Camus] only see the theatre as a means … to signify their philosophical choices. At no time do they attempt to revolutionise their form and structures, carelessly pouring their new wine into the old bottles of traditional theatre' (Serreau 1966, 26).[2]

Esslin might be convinced that 'if Camus argued that in our disillusioned age the world has ceased to make sense, he did so in the elegantly rationalistic and discursive style of an eighteenth-century moralist, in well-constructed and polished plays' (Esslin 2015, 6), but I suggest that this analysis doesn't entirely do Camus justice, because, as we have already seen, throughout his career he concerned himself seriously with giving his diverse philosophical writings adequate stylistic expression. Furthermore, I also hope to show in this chapter that Camus' theatre contains germinal elements of the methods that Esslin attributes to absurd theatre, despite the fact that he believes Camus' theatre to simply follow 'the old convention'. In an attempt to demonstrate Camus' practical (as well as theoretical) ties to the Theatre of the Absurd, this chapter will therefore not only look to two of the playwrights who follow Camus' lead in terms of 'doing philosophy with literature' (Beckett and Ionesco), it will also undertake the slightly more audacious task of examining the three short plays-within-a-play in *Caligula* as pieces of absurd theatre in their own right.

I will begin, therefore, by looking at what I see to be the three conceptual cornerstones of the Theatre of the Absurd, that is, a contemplation of mortality (Sect. 2), a break between language and meaning (Sect. 3), and an intertwined relationship between tragedy and comedy (Sect. 4). We will see not only how each of these elements is manifested in the Theatre of the Absurd, but also how central they are to Camus' own theatre (and the rest of his literature more generally). Analyses of the content of *Caligula* will (for the most part) be saved until the following section

(Sect. 5), where 'les trois spectacles' from this play will form the basis of a case study which points towards the rightful inclusion of Camus in the category of absurd theatre, due to his own generic innovations therein.

2 Time and Mortality

There is a 'tragic unfolding' of events in the Theatre of the Absurd, one critic tells us (Robbe-Grillet 1964, 135), and 'time is tragic precisely because nothing happens there' (Rey 2011, 25),[3] writes another. Why should the passage of time—the most mundane of plot devices—hold such a central and unstable position in the Theatre of the Absurd? Precisely because it is something that more traditional theatre relies on, giving the impression that human perception of time is something that can be taken for granted too. But an awareness of the passage of time is also something which provokes reflection on the human condition, so poignant in its tendency to stand still or slip away—at least in our subjective experiences of it. 'The flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being' (Esslin 2015, 30), as Esslin put it. The Theatre of the Absurd fully embraces this instability, however, and uses it as one of its most powerful tools, and waiting, patience, and repetition often shatter the narrative illusion of temporal logic and progress (Bastien 2009a, 255).

Esslin begins his essay with an anecdote about a production of Beckett's *En attendant Godot* that was performed in San Quentin penitentiary five years earlier. He observes that 'what had bewildered the sophisticated audiences of Paris, London and New York was immediately grasped by an audience of convicts' (Esslin 2015, 1–2). While this incarcerated audience were (for the most part) unlikely to be philosophically literate, they had undoubtedly encountered the feeling of the absurd for themselves. Waiting themselves, with little to do but contemplate the random chain of events that led to their imprisonment, their encounter with absurd theatre seems to have made sense on a level that those privileged viewers couldn't grasp. Esslin writes:

> The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition.

> Throughout our lives we always wait for something, and Godot simply represents the objective of our waiting—an event, a thing, a person, death. Moreover, it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of *time* in its purest, most evident form. If we are active, we tend to forget the passage of time, we pass the time, but if we are merely passively waiting, we are confronted with the action of time itself. (Esslin 2015, 29)

We have already seen (in Chap. 4) how the setting of a quarantine creates such a vacuum in time in *La Peste*, and this effect can be found elsewhere in Camus' work—'killing time' is of course a recurring theme in *L'Etranger*. Meursault not only kills time as a free man (waiting out his long Sunday, alienated from the rest of society) (Camus 2000a, 23–28), he also kills time waiting for death (Camus 2000a, 76–77). This same effect can also be noted in Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve*, when the stage directions at the end of the play indicate that, as the curtains close, the play should begin again (Ionesco 1958b, 42), or in *La Leçon* (Ionesco 1958b, 78), when, after the professor has disposed of the body of his pupil, a new student arrives at the door to set the whole macabre merry-go-round in motion once more.

In Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (written between 1948 and 1949), Vladimir and Estragon keenly feel the absurdity of time—they 'are aware that all we do in this life is as nothing when seen against the senseless action of time, which is in itself an illusion. They are aware that suicide would be the best solution' (Esslin 2015, 44). As a result, they repeatedly ponder Camus' 'one truly serious philosophical problem' (Camus 2005, 1), planning their suicides in each act (Beckett 1990, 19, 87), and failing each time, so hopeless is Beckett's picture of the absurd. Suicide to 'Didi' and 'Gogo' represents an escape from the monotony of being, a monotony which is present throughout Beckett's theatre. In *Embers*, Henry and Ada's empty days stretch on:

> This evening … Nothing this evening. Tomorrow … tomorrow … plumber at nine, then nothing. Plumber at nine? Ah yes, the waste. Words. Saturday … nothing. Sunday … Sunday … nothing all day … Nothing, all day nothing. All day all night nothing … not a sound. (Beckett 1990, 264)

This echoing nothingness recalls the opening scene of *Caligula*, the emptiness reverberating with every line:

FIRST PATRICIAN:	Still nothing.
OLD PATRICIAN:	Nothing this morning, nothing this evening.
SECOND PATRICIAN:	Nothing for three days.
OLD PATRICIAN:	The messengers leave, the messengers return. The just shake their heads and say, 'Nothing.' (Camus 2006, I: 327)

As Bastien put it, 'Nothingness thus evoked is related to death, which occupies a central place in both Camusian and Beckettian preoccupations' (Bastien 2009a, 255).[4]

The repetition of 'nothing' throughout *Caligula* and *En attendant Godot* (and the Theatre of the Absurd more generally) also represents a hopeless prayer to an existential absent God (Sjursen 1992, 83–92).[5] Links can of course be made to the Balzac character in *Le Faiseur*, 'Godeau' who is referred to but never appears onstage (Balzac 2012), and the title, '*En attendant Godot*', clearly alludes to Simone Weil's *Attente de Dieu* (Weil 2016 (originally published in 1950)), but as Bastien points out 'more or less derisively, these few examples suggest that Camus and Beckett summon the biblical intertext only to refute it' (Bastien 2009a, 253)[6]—a prime example being in *Fin de Partie*, when Magg begins to pray, 'Our Father which art in …', but Hamm instead curses the absent deity, 'The bastard! He doesn't exist!' (Beckett 1990, 119) Equally, Ionesco defines the absurd as 'that which is devoid of purpose. […] Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless' (Ionesco 1957),[7] and naturally this experience is at the heart of all of his theatre. Ignorant denial of the absurd is parodied by the detective's commentary on the theatre in *Victimes du Devoir*: 'I don't believe in the absurd; everything hangs together, everything can be comprehended in time … thanks to the achievements of human thought and science' (Ionesco 1988, 159). But for Ionesco, the absurd is inescapable; in *Tueur Sans Gages*, 'the *cité radieuse* … is an image of a world in which all social problems have been solved, all irritation eliminated; and yet, even there, the presence of death makes life futile and absurd' (Esslin 2015, 142).

As we see in Beckett, monotony and existential anguish are inextricably linked—in *En attendant Godot*, Vladimir tells us, 'The air is full of our cries. … But habit is a great deadener' (Beckett 1990, 84). The same goes for Ionesco. In *Amédée ou Comment s'en débarrasser*, an old married couple bicker passive aggressively about a corpse which is in their bedroom, and is growing, taking over the entire house.

MADELEINE: The dead grow faster than the living. Everyone knows that.
AMÉDÉE: Oh! What big nails he's got!
MADELEINE: I can't cut them every day. I've got other things to do! Last week I threw a whole handful into the dustbin … It's not easy to do either. I'm just a servant, I am, just a drudge, waiting on everyone.
AMÉDÉE: His toenails have grown right through his shoes…
MADELEINE: Then buy him another pair, if you've got money to burn! What do you expect *me* to do? I'm not giving you any! We're very poor! You don't seem to realize!
AMÉDÉE: Well, I can't very well give him mine, can I? They're my only pair. Besides, they'd never fit him … Now his feet have got so large!
…
AMÉDÉE: The shutters are fastened tight. Yet it's not dark in his room.
MADELEINE: The light comes from his eyes. You've forgotten to close the lids again.
AMÉDÉE: His eyes haven't aged. They're still beautiful. Great green eyes. Shining like beacons. I'd better go and close them for him.
…
MADELEINE: … He's sowing mushrooms all over the place. If that isn't wickedness! (Ionesco 1988, 15–19)

Despite the macabre and unsettling scenario, the couple simply nag each other, their bitter marriage representing the banality of life next to the backdrop of the absurd. Like all of us, waiting for inevitable death, Amédée and Madeleine wait for death to fill the room (growing limbs,

growing fungus, spreading rancour, the eerie, uncanny light from the corpse's eyes bathing everything), they wait, doing nothing. When Amédée tries to dispose of the body it floats away like a balloon, taking him with it—there is no escaping death, not even in Ionescian flights of fancy.

3 Disintegration of Language (and Meaning)

So far, this volume has concerned itself predominantly with philosophical language, and the style of the written word. But here, the advent of the Theatre of the Absurd presents us with a challenge to the very fabric of language itself—in Beckett's plays, language becomes its own undoing, it 'serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language. Where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meanings' (Esslin 2015, 61). Gessner notes at least ten different ways in which the disintegration of language is manifested in *En attendant Godot*, including clichés, misunderstandings, repetitions, double-entendres, monologues, losses of syntax, and numerous other forms of spoken or orthographical nonsense (Gessner 1957). This is because, as Esslin writes:

> The form, structure, and mood of an artistic statement cannot be separated from its meaning, its conceptual content; simply because the work of art as a whole *is* its meaning, *what* is said in it is indissolubly linked with the *manner* in which it is said, and cannot be said in any other way. Libraries have been filled with attempts to reduce the meaning of a play like Hamlet to a few short and simple lines, yet the play itself remains the clearest and most concise statement of its meaning and message, precisely because its uncertainties and irreducible ambiguities are an essential element of its total impact. These considerations apply, in varying degrees, to all works of creative literature, but they apply with particular force to works that are essentially concerned with conveying their author's sense of mystery, bewilderment, and anxiety when confronted with the human condition, and his despair at being unable to find a meaning in existence. (Esslin 2015, 61)

In response to this seemingly endless desire on the part of critics to explain away the ambiguities in his writing, Beckett himself said, 'My work is a matter of fundamental sounds rendered as fully as possible, and I don't accept responsibility for anything else. If people want to trouble themselves with the harmonics, that's their business' (in Mélèse 1966, 64).[8] This is echoed when Hamm timidly asks Clov at the *denouement* of *Fin de partie*: 'We're not beginning to … to … mean something?' Clov responds, laughing: 'Mean something? You and I mean something! Ah that's a good one!' (Beckett 1990, 108).

But as difficult as Beckett's readers sometimes find his prose, in his own way, he was concerned with clarity and economy (much like the endeavours of Orwell and Camus we saw in Chap. 3). When Beckett was asked why he chose to write predominantly in French by a student writing a thesis on his work, he told them '*Parce qu'en français, c'est plus facile d'écrire sans style*' (in Esslin 2015, 18–19)—the difficulty entailed in writing in a second language was a deterrent from the temptation of using florid rhetorical embellishments. Beckett of course translated his works into English himself—but through the challenge that writing in French imposed on his expression, he was able to retain the directness of his prose written in French, rather than to adapt his writing into more fluent literary English. As Mauriac put it, to speak is to be 'carried along by the logic of the language and its articulations', and the writer 'must use all his cunning so as not to say what the words make him say against his will, but to express instead what by their very nature they are designed to cover up: the uncertain, the contradictory, the unthinkable' (Mauriac 1958, 83). And now, with the stage as our medium, we no longer rely so heavily on spoken or written language to communicate this sense of meaninglessness. As Chestier writes:

> The use of the theatre stage, and later, broadcasting offers Beckett the possibility of an immediate presentation of his creations. During the reading of a novel, we are faced with printed characters that we must bring to life by lending them a silhouette, a face and an imaginary voice. In the theatre, we find ourselves in front of actors in flesh and bone who speak and who act in a portion of space perceivable our senses … the theatre offers a resonance, a temporality and a clean space which brings hearing, seeing and

> living to things which the novel could only describe or leave to the imagination. (Chestier 2003, 115–116)[9]

Thus, the Theatre of the absurd utilises this space to engage the senses, and the audience relies less and less upon linguistic narrative logic.

Unlike Beckett, Ionesco took some persuading of the virtues of the stage, and for a long time found the whole experience somewhat cringeworthy. He tells us:

> I read fiction, essays, I went to the cinema with pleasure. I listened to music from time to time, I visited art galleries, but I hardly ever went to the theatre … Going to the theatre to me meant going to see people, apparently serious people, making a spectacle of themselves … it was the presence on the stage of flesh-and-blood people that embarrassed me. Their material presence destroyed the fiction. (Ionesco 1958a, 247–253)[10]

There was in fact one exception to his dislike for theatre—from a young age he adored Guignol comic marionettes, equivalent to Punch and Judy in the anglophone world. He wrote, 'My mother could not tear me away from the Guignol show at the Luxembourg Gardens. I stayed there, I could stay there, enrapt, for whole days. The spectacle of the Guignol show held me there, as if stupefied, through the sight of these puppets that talked, moved, clubbed each other'. The grotesque puppets, meaningless silliness and violence captivated him—'It was the spectacle of the world itself, which, unusual, improbable, but truer than truth, presented itself to me in an infinitely simplified and caricatured form, as if to underline its grotesque and brutal truth' (Ionesco 1958a, 253).[11] This improbable appreciation for children's entertainment makes a lot more sense when considering his own compositions—we might even say that this violently comic puppetry represented (to Ionesco) a kind of proto-absurd-theatre.

As surprising as Ionesco's history with the theatre was already, the event of him writing his first play was just was unlikely. While trying to learn English with the book, *Assimil Méthode, L'Anglais sans peine*, Ionesco stumbled upon the inspiration for his first play. While he was copying out English phrases into a notebook, when something strange happened:

> I set to work. Conscientiously I copied whole sentences from my primer with the purpose of memorizing them. Rereading them attentively, I learned not English but some astonishing truths—that, for example, there are seven days in the week, something I already knew; that the floor is down, the ceiling up, things I already knew as well, perhaps, but that I had never seriously thought about or had forgotten, and that seemed to me, suddenly, as stupefying as they were indisputably true … To my astonishment, Mrs Smith informed her husband that they had several children, that they lived in the vicinity of London, that their name was Smith, that Mr Smith was a clerk, that they had a servant, Mary—English, like themselves. I should like to point out the irrefutable, perfectly axiomatic character of Mrs Smith's assertions, as well as the entirely Cartesian manner of the author of my English primer; for what was truly remarkable about it was its eminently methodical procedure in its quest for truth. In the fifth lesson, the Smiths' friends the Martins arrive; the four of them begin to chat and, starting from basic axioms, they build more complex truths: 'The country is quieter than the big city' … a strange phenomenon took place. I don't know how—the text began imperceptibly to change before my eyes, and in spite of me. The very simple, luminously clear statements I had copied diligently into my … notebook, left to themselves, fermented after a while, lost their original identity, expanded and overflowed … While writing the play (for it had become a kind of play or anti-play; that is, a parody of a play, a comedy of comedy) I felt sick, dizzy, nauseated. I had to interrupt my work from time to time and, wondering all the while what demon was prodding me on, lie down on my couch for fear of seeing my work sink into nothingness, and me with it. (Ionesco 1958c)[12]

The mundane dialogue and clichés that he was copying out lost all meaning, and sentiments that might seem perfectly normal became alienating and bizarre. Completely by accident he'd hit on something that would be at the heart of all his work—the feeling that everyday life and normal language had become senseless and absurd. In Ionesco's plays, 'congealed language … [is] relentlessly split apart in order to find the living sap beneath' (Ionesco 1958d). Thus began his long career in the theatre, even after his initial distaste for it.

We have already seen (in Chap. 5) how breakdowns of communication and dialogue are used by Camus to represent the absurd, and to illustrate

how not to do ethics. To return briefly to this topic in light of the Theatre of the Absurd, it is worth noting that silence in *Le Malentendu* functions in the same way as the breakdowns of language in Beckett (Bastien 2009a, 259). Of course, this is an example of the effect Esslin draws attention to in claiming that Camus and Sartre's theatre is unsuited to its own philosophical content, in that *Le Malentendu* follows a fairly traditional structure, and following this critique Pierre-Louis Rey writes:

> *Le Malentendu* does not illustrate the situation of incommunicability represented by the 'theatre of the absurd' […] While Camus' play tells the story of a circumstantial misunderstanding, the misunderstanding in Beckett and Ionesco is so consubstantial to the human race that their works are not even intended to tell stories. By hiding his identity, Jan commits an 'absurdity', that is to say, a big mistake. Like Caligula's antics, his conduct only joins the ontological situation of the absurd with verbal confusion. (Rey 2011, 21)[13]

However, as I shall argue in final section of this chapter, certain parts of *Caligula* certainly are comparable with the methods of Beckett and Ionesco. I am also not the only critic to note 'how close *Le Malentendu* comes to making the imaginative leap of form and structure from what Esslin calls the rational and discursive school', and Freeman asks, 'how can an artist communicate to his audience his conviction that it is impossible for human beings to communicate?' In *Le Malentendu*, 'the absurd sees to it that each character blindly ignores that element of what his interlocutor either insinuates or concedes which would bring about the double recognition' (Freeman 1971, 72–73), and language falls apart, just as it does throughout the rest of the Theatre of the Absurd.

4 'Une autre face du tragique'

As we have already seen, in the Theatre of the Absurd, the mundane regularly morphs into the absurd, but in this next section, we will take a look at how this meaninglessness and nonsense often become humorous and

cathartic. This is true of no one's work more than Ionesco's. *La Cantatrice Chauve* is set (according to Ionesco's hilarious stage directions) as follows:

> SCENE: *A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs. An English evening. Mr. Smith, an Englishman, seated in his English armchair and wearing English slippers, is smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper, near an English fire. He is wearing English spectacles and a small gray English mustache. Beside him, in another English armchair, Mrs. Smith, an Englishwoman, is darning some English socks. A long moment of silence. The English clock strikes 17 English strokes*. (Ionesco 1958b, 8)

The play itself begins, as we've seen, in the context of banal domesticity, and Mr. and Mrs. Smith's conversations (amongst themselves and with visitors that arrive) devolve into complete nonsense in the most baffling and hilarious way. But just like Ionesco's entire career, the hilarity of this composition was not premeditated—indeed, he was 'amazed to hear the audience laugh at what he considered a tragic spectacle of human life reduced to passionless automatism through bourgeois convention and the fossilization of language' (Esslin 2015, 109). Ionesco embraced this effect, however, transcending the banal and using its absurdity to the fullest: 'To feel the absurdity of the commonplace, and of language—its falseness—is already to have gone beyond it. To go beyond it we must first of all bury ourselves in it', he wrote, 'What is comical is the unusual in its pure state; nothing seems more surprising to me than that which is banal; the surreal is here, within grasp of our hands, in our everyday conversation' (Ionesco 1955).[14] In essence then, by delving into the artificial norms and pleasantries we take for granted, we can find the juxtaposition of society and mortality at the very core of our being.

This is a necessary reminder from Ionesco that, although he presents us a world which invokes unstifled laughter, the subject matter at the foundation of his work is of the gravest import. *Rhinocéros* (Ionesco 1960c), for example, is inspired by his own experience of the rise in fascism in Romania, and the

unsettling feeling that people around him were being infected with a monstrous ideological contagion. He recalls:

> In the course of my life I have been very much struck by what one might call the current of opinion, by its rapid evolution, its power of contagion, which is that of a real epidemic. People allow themselves suddenly to be invaded by a new religion, a doctrine, a fanaticism. … At such moments we witness a veritable mental mutation. I don't know if you have noticed it, but when people no longer share your opinions, when you can no longer make yourself understood by them, one has the impression of being confronted with monsters—rhinos, for example. They have that mixture of candour and ferocity. They would kill you with the best of consciences. And history has shown us during the last quarter of a century that people thus transformed not only resemble rhinos, but really become rhinoceroses. (Ionesco 1960a)[15]

This was instantly recognisable to the audience at the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus during the plays first performance—hearing once more 'the arguments used by the characters who feel they must follow the trend as those they themselves had heard, or used, at a time when people in Germany could not resist the lure of Hitler' (Esslin 2015, 145).

Numerous elements of *Rhinocéros* are akin to Camus' own re-imagining of a fascist epidemic, *La Peste*. Both authors evidently felt the alienating sensation of one's peers slowly being picked off by an unfathomable disease, and were concerned with what this situation revealed about humanity. 'The true society, the authentic human community', Ionesco wrote, 'is extra-social—a wider, deeper society, that which is revealed by our common anxieties, our desires, our secret nostalgias' (Ionesco 1958d). Naturally, Ionesco's composition is more fanciful—supernatural—but that, according to Ionesco, is what is so great about the theatrical medium: 'Everything is permitted in the theatre: to bring characters to life, but also to materialize states of anxiety, inner presences' (Ionesco 1958a, 262).[16] In choosing such a turn of phrase, however, Ionesco is once again drawing attention to his Camusian inheritance. Camus, himself drawing on Dostoevsky, writes in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 'The absurd does not liberate, it binds. It does not authorise all actions. Everything is permitted does not mean that nothing is forbidden' (Camus 2005, 65)—while anything

is possible in the world of theatre, Camus wants us to remember that in real life, we share this absurd condition with others. Ionesco in fact revisited the subject of contagion in *Jeux de Massacre*, a late piece cataloguing a more literal plague (Lemesle 2017). Elsewhere, Ionesco recalls how at one time in his youth he dreamed of becoming a saint (Ionesco 1960b), unwittingly echoing Camus once one, this time *à la façon de* Tarrou in *La Peste*.

But what is so great about the Theatre of the Absurd, is its ability to approach this same serious subject matter, and allow us to see the ridiculousness of it. *Rhinocéros* isn't just, as Esslin puts it, a 'tract against conformism and insensitivity … it also mocks the individualist who merely makes a virtue of necessity in insisting on his superiority as a sensitive, artistic being' (Esslin 2015, 146). Even those who believe that have a just cause appear comical against the backdrop of absurdity, and, in Ionesco's words, 'all of this can just as well become euphoric; anguish is suddenly transformed into liberty' (Ionesco 1955)[17] Comedy is thus nothing but 'une autre face du tragique' (Ionesco 1966, 173).[18] Naturally, the same applies to the work of Samuel Beckett, and his works exhibit numerous examples of the tragic merging with the comic. Virgine Lupo suggests that 'this kind of humour is what we might call metaphysical laughter' (Lupo 1999, 131).[19] Lupo uses the examples of the Charlie Chaplin-like costumes used in staging *En attendant Godot* as an example of this effect—in dressing the wastrel, suicidal characters as slapstick heroes, 'this excess of pain and horror manages to provoke the comic' (Lupo 1999, 128).[20]

But where this kind of theatre offers laughter as a cathartic anthesis for the absurd (and perhaps even a kind of therapy for it), 'never in Camus' theatre have comic and tragic become to this extent two sides of the same reality, as they are in Ionesco' (Rey 2011, 26).[21] Instead, Camus maintains some hope for the human condition. As Bastien put it, he 'believes in intelligence and is invested in sensibility and the faculties of the imagination. For him, the heavy discovery of the absurd is not terminal' (Bastien 2009a, 260).[22] For Camus (as is no doubt clear by now), the absurd is the necessary foundation for building an ethics and defending the value of human life authentically—it is, as Robbe-Grillet suggest, a kind of 'tragic humanism' (Robbe-Grillet 1964, 70–71).[23] Because Camus' absurd is a starting point, it is therefore far less bleak: 'In essence,

the Camusian man and the Beckettian man are antagonists. The first obsessed with the passion to live, the other harassed by the image of life as a miserable wait' (Sjursen 1992, 83).[24] Bastien sums this up with a snappy conclusion that 'if the Camusian man is sentenced to death, the Beckettian man is condemned to exist' (Bastien 2009a, 260).[25] In essence then, the laughter so central to the Theatre of the Absurd springs forth from a place of hopelessness—in the face of the absurd, these playwrights seem to proffer the old adage that 'you have to laugh or you'll cry'. As one critic writes, 'Having understood that his task is impossible, the Sisyphus of the 'theatre of the absurd' remains permanently seated at the foot of the slope' (Rey 2011, 26).[26] Camus' absurd is far less bleak, however, and instead of simply relying on a laugh of harrowing incredulity, Camus' absurd is a theoretical foundation for life-affirming ethical action.

5 Camus' Absurd Theatre

Up until this point we have considered the innovations of two of the most prominent playwrights of the absurd, and while we have taken Camus as an important precursor to this movement in theatre, he has been looked at as merely an influence, rather than a contributor. In this section, however, we will examine some elements of Camus' theatre which (I argue) are in many ways equal to the Theatre of the Absurd—that is, *les trois spectacles* in *Caligula*. It is nigh on accepted wisdom that Camus shares only a conceptual background with Ionesco and Beckett, and this stance has been put forward by numerous critics. Esslin writes:

> The pattern of exposition, conflict, and final solution mirrors a view of the world in which solutions are possible, a view based on a recognizable and generally accepted pattern of an objective reality that can be apprehended so that the purpose of man's existence and the rules of conduct it entails can be deduced from it … [this] applies even to the theatre of Sartre and Camus, which is based on a philosophy of the absurdity of human existence. Even plays like … *Caligula* allow the audience to take home an intellectually formulated philosophical lesson. The Theatre of the Absurd, however, which proceeds not by intellectual concepts but by poetic images,

> neither poses an intellectual problem in its exposition nor provides any clear-cut solution that would be reducible to a lesson or an apothegm. (Esslin 2015, 350–351)

According to Morvan Lebesque, Camus is an heir of 'traditional theatre', and 'prisoner of his forms' (Lebesque 1964, 170),[27] and therefore should not be considered among these other playwrights of the absurd. Popkin is in agreement—he writes, 'Camus addresses us in the most elevated language he can write. The result has its merits as oratory and dialectic, but it is deficient as drama' (Popkin 1962, 172). And while Bastien points out that *Caligula* 'is inventing many other means of expression. He takes advantage of translinguistic codes which fall under the senses and take over from speech' (Bastien 2009a, 256),[28] she nevertheless remarks that, 'with its linear action and classical language, Camus' traditional script [*Caligula*] does not approach the formal revolution specific to the New Theatre' (Bastien 2009b, 167–168).[29]

Of course, many of Camus' plays (such as *Le Malentendu*, *L'Etat de siège*, and *Les Justes*) are indeed for the most part written in a pretty conventional manner, as so many critics suggest. But as Bastien points out that 'Beckett and Ionesco are fully understood only through a Camusian lens' (Bastien 2006, 272),[30] and naturally it is clear that the Theatre of the Absurd couldn't exist without the absurd having been theorised previously by Camus—but this is hardly a bold claim. What I hope to demonstrate throughout the remainder of this chapter, is that Camus himself wrote pieces of drama that can be classified as 'Theatre of the Absurd' as it bears all the hallmarks of this kind of drama. Caligula performs his own theatre of the absurd, and in his performances there is 'a match between the organization of a work and the *non*-sense it carries' (Bastien 2009a, 257).[31] In other words (as Pierre-Louis Rey puts it), 'The mystery of the world […] is no less opaque for the viewer of *Caligula* than for that of *Godot* or *Endgame*' (Rey 2011, 28).[32]

Sounding very much like Camus himself, Ionesco wrote, 'Because the artist apprehends reality directly, he is a true philosopher. And it is from the range, the depth and the sharpness of his truly philosophical vision that his greatness springs' (Ionesco 1958a, 270).[33] We have already seen the attempts of Ionesco and Beckett at communicating philosophically

through art and imbuing their forms with concepts. Here we will look at how 'the sharpness of [Camus'] truly philosophical vision' comes across in *Caligula*, and the formal (as well as conceptual) links between Camus and these playwrights of the absurd. Each of Caligula's performances exhibit the three tenets of absurd theatre referred to throughout this chapter—that is, a contemplation of mortality, a break between language and meaning, and an intertwined relationship between tragedy and comedy. As we will see in this section, these three elements are very much interlinked in all three spectacles.

The first of Caligula's performances is of course is curious imitation of Venus, and it is 'une véritable pièce de théâtre', according to Sophie Bastien (Bastien 2006, 181). In *L'Homme révolté*, Camus writes, 'Hitler, at the height of his madness', embodies the 'indefatigable … claim of the human race to divinity' (Camus 2000b, 155). Here, the preposterousness of a dictator's claim to divinity is parodied by Caligula: having already put the fear of god into his subjects through demonstrations of his nihilistic omnipotence, Caligula becomes a god through fantasy and pantomime. The setting of the performance provides the looming presence of mortality—under the rule of a blood-thirsty dictator, every character is aware that each day might be their last—including Caligula himself. Here, 'divinity is reduced to the rank of a fairground attraction' (Bastien 2006, 182),[34] and were the patricians able to do something other than fear for their lives, they would have to stifle laughter in the face of this grotesque goddess. By becoming God, Caligula subverts religion and reason, parodying the tragic godlessness of the universe and our position in it as mortals, but through his comedic capers, the absurdity of life shines forth. As Stoltzfus observes, Camusian theatre is 'pre-Ionescian' in its manifestation of 'tragic farce' (Stoltzfus 1991, 191).

Caligula proclaims, 'Today, I'm Venus', and Sophie Bastien suggests that he might as well add 'Tomorrow, I'll be something else', owing to the fact that 'he presents himself so much as an actor' (Bastien 2006, 182).[35] Bastien notes the paradox in this presentation—as a player in a brief performance, and as a god, Caligula sarcastically embodies both the ephemeral and the eternally divine (Bastien 2006, 182). This performance is parodically liturgical—and as she puts it, 'By the staging of an artificial mysticism, a simulacrum of epiphany, he exhibits his lack of faith. This

subversion of a religious event is based on an absurd perception of life' (Bastien 2006, 183).[36] This is all conducted with meta self-awareness, almost breaking the fourth wall, Caligula draws attention to the role he has cast himself as in the tragicomedy of life:

CALIGULA: There's no understanding Fate; therefore I choose to play the part of Fate. I wear the foolish, unintelligible face of a professional god.
…
SCIPIO: That too, Caius, is blasphemy.
CALIGULA: No, Scipio, it's dramatic art. The great mistake you people make is not to take the drama seriously enough. If you did, you'd know that any man can play lead in the divine comedy and become a god. (Camus 1984, 75–76)

It seems here that Caligula (and indeed perhaps Camus) has a sense of life itself as absurd theatre, all the world being a stage, in the Shakespearean sense. Camus, as Bastien put it, 'deeply feels the theatricality of life and takes it as a major manifestation of life's absurdity' (Bastien 2006, 231).[37]

Caligula's second spectacle is a dance number. Grotesque, comical, absurd, the dance that the emperor performs is certainly like a short piece of immersive *Nouveau Théâtre*, but the aspect of this spectacle which is particularly jarring is the context of an audience of conspirators who, convinced that their clandestine insurgency against the tyrant has been discovered, anxiously await whatever cruel punishment he might throw at them—and all that follows is a bizarre and flamboyant mime act:

> If the first internal spectacle is remarkable for its development, this one is, on the contrary, by its brevity … The emperor knows that he will die soon, hence the brevity of the sequence, just as he knows the inanity of all his action, hence the ridiculousness of his costume and his gestures, and the fleeting shadow. His dance is the metaphorical abyss of his own situation. It is also, with more impact, a metaphor for the human condition. (Bastien 2006, 186–187)[38]

In other words, this absurd performance is just as much a metaphor for Caligula's own fate, as it is for all of ours.

Pierre-Louis Rey writes, 'For the authors of the 'theatre of the absurd', ontologically, the body is simply *there*. In the eyes of Camus, it is a medium' (Rey 2011, 23),[39] but this misses the point that for both Camus and these playwrights of the absurd, the body is a condition of our thrownness, it is the source of all our freedoms and prisons, and death happens to us precisely because the body *is there*. As we have already seen, and as Lupo points out, 'Beckett … pushes his mission of rendering language destitute so far by creating mimodramas' (Lupo 1999, 127)[40]—necessarily the theatrical body steps in to communicate the absurd, often through comic violence and warped figures. But Lupo also suggests that 'in Beckett, the body exhibits its sufferings. All his characters are infirm, blind, impotent, vagabonds or old men who constantly rehash their physical decay', while 'Camus never reveals to us the monstrosity of grotesque, deformed or mutilated bodies' (Lupo 1999, 127–128).[41] For the most part this is true (excluding, of course, the sickness and horror in *La Peste*), but this doesn't mean that Camus doesn't find other corporeal ways to illustrate the absurd—the second spectacle in *Caligula* is of course brimming with mime and grotesque pageantry. Lupo writes, 'Camus does not use movements or mimes in order to oppose language. The body will be language, will express something. However, we will see that the use of this language is not a habit for Camus' (Lupo 1999, 131).[42] Lupo nevertheless points out that there are examples of 'mute scenes' (Lupo 1999, 132),[43] in *Révolte dans les Asturies*, *Caligula*, and *L'Etat de siège*. Camus even writes in the stage directions, '*During this scene all the players, Caligula and Cæsonia excepted, behave like marionettes in a puppet play*' (Camus 1984, 57). The focus of the current chapter has been (in part) the instances in *Caligula* which have such an effect—*les trois spectacle* in which the more classical elements of the play are overthrown by absurd pantomime. This is particularly pertinent to the second of these performances, as here he abandons language altogether. Indeed, for Camus, the absurdity of life *is mime*—'All existence for a man turned away from the eternal is but a vast mime under the mask of the absurd' (Camus 2005, 91).

In his use of mime, costume, and dance, Caligula toys with the relationship between language and meaning, often with comical results. The third spectacle is a poetry reading, of which Caligula is the stage director,

and it is here that we see that the relationship between words and meaning is as unsettling for Caligula as any other absurd dramatist. Lupo writes of 'the importance that Caligula gives to words', suggesting that 'every word has a meaning, a deep value and we must not play with it. We must respect language. The approach of Eugène Ionesco, for example, seems perfectly inconceivable for Camus. Because, in the theatre of the absurd, language is often disarticulated, relayed by the mime' (Lupo 1999, 353).[44] There is certainly a poignancy for Caligula when it comes to the relationship between words and meaning, and this is something he endeavours to share with his subjects in *le troisième spectacle*—the struggle for meaning in the face of death. Caligula sets Cæsonia, Cherea, and the patricians the task of composing and performing a poem on the subject of death. This torturously awkward contest effectually trivialises this profound topic—'it's Caligula who evaluates how men face death' (Bastien 2006, 188).[45] In the context of this recital, given its topic, the pageant's participants are confronted directly with the inadequacy of language to express their awareness of mortality.

6 Chapter Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this volume, Camus was all too aware of the problem of communicating philosophical content through form. This is no less an issue when it comes to his theatre. Indeed, as Freeman suggests, the reason Camus abandoned his first version of *Caligula* in 1937 was 'partly because of the difficulty of communicating the absurd on the stage without a totally different concept of form and style—a problem which the so-called 'absurd playwrights', notably Beckett and Ionesco, attempted to solve in a radical way' (Freeman 1971, 43). It has hitherto been overlooked, however, that *Caligula* exhibits some of the radical methods of the Theatre of the Absurd, even if the play in its entirety seems to have (for the most part) a rather classical structure. Caligula himself is the absurd performer *par excellence*, and as Popkin writes, he 'compels us to admire his comic talents: in one unconnected episode after another, this tyrant and mass-murderer engages our interest and even our sympathy with his ingenious exposures of patrician banality

and the illogic of everyday life' (Popkin 1962, 172). This is true most of all in his *trois spectacles*, where he uses mime, dance, costume, and wordplay to give his audience (both on and off the stage) a feeling of the absurd.

Thus we see the huge oversight in the scholarship on Camus' theatre, where it is often claimed that 'Ionesco and his colleagues in the theatre of the absurd have innovated, invented a new form of theatre (deconstruction of characters, explosion of language, disappearance of the action), while Camus wouldn't have participated except for in a very 'classic' manner' (Lupo 1999, 465).[46] Of *Caligula*, Coombs writes:

> The alliance between a classical style, metaphysical depth and clown antics was cemented by an element that perhaps, more than any other, contributed to the success of *Caligula*: the exuberant breath of youth that communicates to the work an irresistible movement. At the tensest moment of action when the cruel grimace begins to freeze in a grin, a pirouette breaks the tension and restores the threatened balance. Charm, cheerfulness and buffoonery are the traits that have been neglected in favor of the philosophical message. (Coombs 1968, 87)[47]

And here she certainly elucidates some of the key elements of Camus' (and Caligula's) absurd theatre. Communicating desperation, lostness, and anguish, through mediums which provoke bitter, yet liberating laughter—*Caligula* is absurdly theatrical indeed. In this chapter, we have seen how a number of playwrights have picked up Camus' concept of the absurd and run with it. But as has been mentioned on numerous occasions throughout this thesis, for Camus, the absurd is nought but a necessary foundation for his ethical project. In the next chapter, we will look at a ground-breaking novel which not only responds to Camus' œuvre in a sensitive and scrupulous fashion—it has also adopted Camus' own task of communicating ethical concerns through engagement with literature.

Notes

1. In French, 'Les auteurs du théâtre de l'Absurde sont peut-être ceux qui ont profité de la façon la plus positive de la pensée de Camus'.

2. In French, 'Moralistes avant d'être dramaturges, [Sartre et Camus] ne voient dans le théâtre qu'un moyen … de signifier leurs options philosophiques. À aucun moment, ils ne tentent d'en révolutionner la forme et les structures, versant avec insouciance leur vin nouveau dans les vieilles outres du théâtre traditionnel'.
3. In French, 'le temps y est tragique précisément parce que rien ne s'y déroule'.
4. In French, 'Le néant ainsi évoqué s'apparente à la mort, qui occupe une place centrale dans les préoccupations camusienne et beckettienne'.
5. In French, 'rien'.
6. In French, 'En versant plus ou moins dans la dérision, ces quelques exemples portent à croire que Camus et Beckett ne convoquent l'intertexte biblique que pour le réfuter' (my translation).
7. Translation in Esslin (2015, 5).
8. In French, Mon œuvre est une question de sons fondamentaux rendus aussi pleinement que possible, et je n'accepts pas la responsabilité d'autre chose. Si les gens veulent casser la tête sur les harmoniques c'est leur affaire'.
9. In French, 'Le recours à la scène théâtrale et, plus tard, à la radiodiffusion vont offrir à Beckett la possibilité d'une presentation immédiate de ses existants. Durant la lecture d'un roman, on est en face de caractères d'imprimerie qu'il faut faire vivre en leur prêtant une silhouette, un visage et une voix imaginaire. Au théâtre, nous nous trouvons devant des acteurs en chair et en os qui parlent et qui agissent dans une portion d'espace qui tombe sous nos sens … le théâtre propose une résonance, une temporalité et une espace propres qui donnent à entendre, à voir et à vivre ce que le roman ne pouvait que décrire ou laisser imaginer'.
10. Translation in Esslin (2015, 105).
11. Translation in Esslin (2015, 102–103).
12. Translation in Esslin (2015, 106–107).
13. In French, *'Le Malentendu* n'illustre pas davantage la situation d'incommunicabilité figurée par la 'théâtre de l'absurde' […] Alors que la pièce de Camus raconte l'histoire d'un quiproquo circonstanciel, le quiproquo est chez Beckett et Ionesco si consubstantiel au genre humain que leurs œuvres n'ont même pas vocation à raconter des histoires. En cachant son identité, Jan commet une 'absurdité', c'est-à-dire une grosse bêtise. Comme les pitreries de Caligula, sa conduite ne rejoint qu'à la faveur d'une confusion verbale la situation ontologique de l'absurde'.

14. Translation in Esslin (2015, 111–112).
15. Translation in Esslin (2015, 144).
16. Translation in Esslin (2015, 152).
17. Translation in Esslin (2015, 124).
18. In English, 'Another face of tragedy'.
19. In French, 'Cette sorte d'humour est ce que l'on pourrait nommer le rire métaphysique'.
20. In French, 'Cependant, cet excès de douleurs et d'horreurs parvient à provoquer le comique'.
21. In French, 'Jamais, dans la théâtre de Camus, comique et tragique ne sont devenus à ce point, comme ils le seront chez Ionesco, les deux faces d'une même réalité'.
22. In French, 'croit en l'intelligence et investit dans la sensibilité et dans les facultés de l'imagination. Pour lui, le lourd constat de l'absurde n'est pas terminal'.
23. In French, 'L'absurde est donc bien une forme d'humanisme tragique'.
24. In French, 'De leur essence, l'homme camusien et l'homme beckettien sont antagonistes. Le premier obsédé par la passion de vivre, l'autre harcelé par l'image de la vie comme une attente misérable'.
25. In French, 'Si l'homme camusien est condamné à mort, l'homme becketienne est condamné à exister'.
26. In French, 'Ayant compris que leur tâche était impossible, les Sisyphe du 'théâtre de l'absurde' restent définitivement assis au bas de la pente'.
27. In French, 'théâtre traditionelle', 'prisonnier de ses formes'.
28. In French, 's'invente bien d'autres moyens d'expression. Il profite des codes translinguistiques, qui tombent sous les sens et relaient la parole'.
29. In French, 'Certes, avec une action linéaire et une langue classique, la facture traditionnelle de Camus n'approche pas la révolution formelle propre au Nouveau Théâtre … [Ionesco] profite de l'enseignement de Caligula et … en assume les conséquences et l'extrapole'.
30. In French, 'on ne comprend pleinement Beckett et Ionesco qu'à travers une optique camusienne'.
31. In French, 'une adéquation entre l'organisation d'une œuvre et le *non*-sens qu'elle porte'.
32. In French, 'Le mystère du monde […] n'est pas moins opaque pour le spectateur de *Caligula* que pour celui de *Godot* ou de *Fin de partie*'.
33. Translation in Esslin (2015, 150).
34. In French, 'la divinité est ravalée au rang d'une curiosité de foire'.

35. "'Aujourd'hui, je suis Vénus"… Demain, je serai autre chose, pourrait-il ajouter: il se présente en tant que comédien'.
36. In French, 'Par la mise en scène d'un mysticisme artificiel, d'un simulacre d'épiphanie, il exhibe présisément son manque de foi. Cette subversion du fait religieux se fonde sur une perception absurde de la vie'.
37. In French, 'la récurrence de la thématique théâtrale et surtout l'esprit dans lequel l'auteur l'utilise, suggèrent que ce dernier ressent profondément la théâtralité de la vie et qu'il en fait une manifestation majeure de son absurdité'.
38. In French, 'Si le premier spectacle interne est remarquable par son développement, celui-ci l'est, au contraire, par sa brièveté … L'empereur sait qu'il va mourir sous peu, d'où la brièveté de la séquence, comme il sait l'inanité de toute son action, d'où le ridicule de son costume et de sa gestuelle, et l'ombre fugace. Sa danse est une mise en abîme métaphorique de sa propre situation. Elle est aussi, avec plus d'impact, de la condition humaine'.
39. In French, 'Pour les auteurs du 'théâtre de l'absurde', de façon ontologique, le corps *est là*. Aux yeux de Camus, il est un moyen'.
40. In French, 'Beckett … pousse très loin son enterprise de destitution du langage en créant des mimodrames' (my translation).
41. In French, 'Jamais Camus ne nous expose la monstruosité de corps grotesques, déformes ou mutilés. Chez Beckett, le corps exhibe ses souffrances. Tout ses personnages sont infirmes, aveugles, impotents, des vagabonds ou des vieillards qui ne cessant de ressasser leur déchéance physique'.
42. In French, 'Au contraire, Camus n'utilise pas les mouvements, les mimes dans le but de s'opposer au langage. Le corps va être langage, va exprimer quelque chose. Toutefois, nous verrons que l'utilisation de ce langage n'est pas une habitude chez Camus'.
43. In French, 'scènes jouées à la muette'.
44. In French, 'l'importance que Caligula accorde aux paroles … Chaque mot a un sens, une valeur profonde et on ne doit pas jouer avec cela. On doit respecter la langage. La démarche d'un Eugène Ionesco, par example, semble parfaitement inconcevable pour Camus. Car, dans la théâtre de l'absurde, le langage est souvent désarticulé, relayé par le mime'.
45. In French, 'c'est Caligula qui évalue comment les hommes font face à la mort'.

46. In French, 'Ainsi, il semblerait que justement Ionesco et ses collègues de théâtre de l'absurde aient innové, aeint inventé une nouvelle forme de théâtre (déconstruction des personnages, explosion du langage, disparition de l'action), tandis que Camus, n'y aurait participé que de manière très "classique"'.
47. In French, 'L'alliance entre un style classique, de la profondeur métaphysique et des cabrioles de pître était cimentée par un élément qui peut-être, plus que tout autre, contribua au succès de *Caligula*: le souffle exubérant de jeunesse qui communique à l'œuvre un mouvement irrésistible. Au moment le plus crispé de l'action où la grimace cruelle commence à se figer dans un rictus, une pirouette vient briser la tension et rétablir l'équilibre menacé. Charme, gaieté, bouffonnerie, sont des traits que l'on n'a que trop négligé en faveur du message philosophique'.

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7

A Novelistic Afterlife

1 Chapter Introduction

Since publication, Algerian journalist Kamel Daoud's debut novel, *Meursault, contre-enquête* (Daoud 2014), has received considerable attention among Camus scholars and general readers alike. The novel revisits some of Albert Camus' most famous works, but from the perspective of post-Independence Algeria, providing the reader with a rich allegorical account of Algerian identity, politics, and history, and the duality therein, as well as (as I will argue in this chapter) an exploration of the role of literature in ethical understanding. The revelation and depth of *Meursault, contre-enquête* is thus worthy of comparison to other *tours de force* of post-colonial rewriting such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (2012/1966) and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (2012/1986), as well as ethical metafictions such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2016/2001). The text itself is in part a pastiche of Camus' œuvre, recycling his storylines, motifs, philosophical ideas, and even whole passages from the original texts, which has led the novel to be interpreted in many ways—as an homage, as a critique, even as plagiarism. As I hope to show in this chapter, *Meursault, contre-enquête* is so much more than that—this novel takes up Camus' mantle, arguing for

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and demonstrating the power of literature to bring about moral understanding.[1]

The majority of commentators on Daoud's novel have understandably tended to focus on the postcolonial side of the novel (e.g. Richardson 2015; Lalami 2015), because, as one critic writes, *Meursault, contre-enquête* 'exposes what might be called the colonial unconscious of the original's representational strategies' (Brozgal 2016, 39). Upon the release of the English translation, a review by *Guardian* journalist, Nick Fraser, implied that the novel reveals an underlying 'white racism' which informs *L'Etranger*; on account of Camus' failure to give 'the Arab' a name (Fraser 2015)—I contend that this analysis hardly does justice to either text. Another reviewer, writing in *Tablet* magazine, takes the more nuanced position that the 'power of *The Meursault Investigation* comes from the way it reinstates precisely what Camus omits from *The Outsider*: not simply the name of 'the Arab', or a political agenda, but a morality based on empathy' (Kirsch 2015). My focus in this chapter is *how* this novel 'reinstates' such a morality. In its creation of a dialogue between oppressed and oppressor, I suggest that *Meursault, contre-enquête* demonstrates the ability of narrative praxis to facilitate a reader's comprehension and reconstruction of both the self and other. The novel is *not only* the story of a man learning to understand his supposed enemy through engagement with his writing, it is also the story of a man learning to understand himself through the activity of reading. As such, I contend that the insights generated by engagement with this postcolonial text have important ethical implications which can be applied to the role of literary narratives more generally. More specifically, I suggest that the role of Meursault in *Meursault, contre-enquête* is one that re-instils a non-religious faith in Harun,[2] the novel's protagonist—one that he has lost through his postcolonial encounter with Algeria.

With a view to the aims aforementioned, the following section will make salient some key features of both *L'Etranger* and *Meursault, contre-enquête*, illustrating their relationship to my argument. In the third section, I will then attempt to construct a philosophical framework for understanding the kind of knowledge that Harun attains, by borrowing both from Eleonore Stump's work in philosophy of religion (Stump 2010), and Frank Jackson's epistemic theory (Jackson 1982). In Sect. 4, I

go on to use this framework as a tool for analysing not only Daoud's novel, but also for making reference to Camus' work. While Eleonore Stump draws her epistemic theory from Christian theology, I suggest that her conception of Franciscan knowledge has useful implications beyond these borders, as it hits on something important—the power of narrative to communicate alternative perspectives on the world. This secularisation of Franciscan knowledge is also reflected in the novel's exploration of faith and redemption. Guilt is central to the activity of *Meursault, contre-enquête*—not only Meursault's guilt but also (as we will come to see) Harun's. In the fifth section, therefore, I suggest that, just as faith is often derived from the kind of religious stories upon which Stump bases her conception of Franciscan knowledge, Harun is able to nurture a kind of faith through his engagement with Meursault's narrative. This faith is a non-religious faith in the Other, one that enables Harun to feel redeemed from his own guilt, transcending the ethical judgements he imposes on himself via post-Independence Algerian norms. This is a post-religious, postcolonial faith that enriches Harun's experience of his homeland, reconciling him to his own otherness.

2 From Meursault to Harun

L'Etranger is certainly one of the most written about novels of the twentieth century—and rightly so. This text not only approaches some of the most important philosophical themes (as we have already seen) but it is also tremendously readable, at just over a hundred pages long and in a simple and engaging first-person narrative. These qualities alone have secured it a place on reading lists for philosophy and literature since its publication, but more recent studies have focused less on the content of the novel than what it fails to say.[3] To understand what this means it would perhaps help to recap on some details of the plot. Our protagonist, Meursault, is a young man living alone and working in an unstimulating job in French Algeria. He seems to apathetically take everything in his stride (including personal relationships and even the death of his mother)—he is 'a poster boy for the unexamined life', as George Heffernan so eloquently put it (Heffernan 2017, 16). It seems as though nothing

could upset this character's world, until one day he becomes involved in a quarrel between a rather dubious friend of his and a group of young Arabic-Algerian men. The turning point of the novel is the moment when Meursault finds himself in front of these men with a gun in his hand on a scorching beach. The incredible heat of the sun crashing onto the sand is too much for Meursault, and he loses control, killing one of the men. The second half of the novel catalogues the events that follow this spilling of blood—that is, Meursault's imprisonment, trial, and his awaiting the death sentence. Throughout these momentous events, the reader is privy to the thoughts of Meursault, with reflections that are philosophically very interesting. But the narrative is painfully one sided: the man that Meursault killed is referred to throughout simply as 'the Arab', and consequently *this* other is not engaged with at all—his story and person are completely absent from the novel. This is where Daoud steps in, albeit almost 70 years later. Other literary attempts to address this deficit include Leila Aboulela's radio play *The Insider* (2013), which reimagined the lives of the Arabic characters of the novel in the postcolonial era, and Emteaz Hussain's play, *Outsiders* (2015), which continues the story after Meursault's trial and execution, focusing on the marginalised women in the story (Arabic-Algerian and French-Algerian), Sumaya, 'The Arab's' sister, and Marie, Meursault's girlfriend. While these adaptations and responses are of course extremely valuable and illuminating, Daoud's contribution goes even further—it responds to and engages in Camus' own project of ethical communication through literature.

Meursault, contre-enquête is written from the perspective of the brother of the dead 'Arab', and at last he is given a name—Musa. Musa's brother, Harun, tells us the other side of the story, giving us another view of the world that Meursault inhabited. Harun's life is scarred by the death of his older brother, and though the murder appears in the newspapers, only the murderer is named, not the victim. Consequently, Musa's poor, illiterate family is alienated from the crime—they simply never see him again, and Harun is left to obsess about this mysterious killer. One idiosyncrasy of *Meursault, contre-enquête* that is important to note is that Camus' book, *L'Etranger*, exists within the world of the novel, appearing as a first-person account of Meursault's crime and trial, written by Meursault himself. This text is referred to using an alternative, yet very apt title, 'The

Other' (Daoud 2015, 127),[4] while the real-life author, Camus, has simply ceased to exist. While this results in some complicated issues relating to authorship and truth (which I will make some reference to towards the end of Sect. 3), the presence of the 'The Other' in the world of the novel highlights an issue which is in fact central to this chapter—that is, the role that narrative plays in coming to understand the Other. By giving Meursault the role of 'author' of *L'Etranger*, his actions are treated with the moral seriousness they deserve. We are also given an extraordinarily acute illustration of how a novel's narrative can act as a window into the mind of the Other, through which we can perceive truths otherwise inaccessible. This effect demonstrates Iris Murdoch's claim that 'prose literature can reveal an aspect of the world which no other art can reveal … and in the case of the novel, the most important thing to be thus revealed, not necessarily the only thing, but incomparably the most important thing, is that other people exist' (Murdoch 1999, 281–282).

To return to the plot of *Meursault, contre-enquête*, our protagonist, Harun, grows up bereft by the loss of his brother, and indeed their mother never ceases to mourn Musa. It is a long time, however, before Harun is even aware that there is a book written by his brother's murderer about the event of Musa's death; when he discovers this, naturally it is a revelation. When he finally reads *L'Etranger*/'The Other' what is most striking to him is the complete absence of his brother from the book. Yes, Meursault kills an 'Arab'; yes, spilling Musa's blood on Algerian sand changes Meursault's life irrevocably; yes, committing murder brings about some intense philosophical reflection on life, death, and guilt; but not in the way anyone possessing an ounce of compassion for the victim would expect. Musa is only ever referred to as 'the Arab', and Meursault's philosophical reflections are brought on by his own imminent death, not the fact he has taken another life. As Harun tells us:

> Musa's body will remain a mystery. There's not a word in the book about it. That's denial of a shockingly violent kind, don't you think? As soon as the shot is fired, the murderer turns around, heading for a mystery he considers worthier of interest than the Arab's life. (Daoud 2015, 46)

Musa's identity was erased not by death, but by the insignificance entailed in his status as 'Arab' in a colonised country. Nevertheless, this mystery has tormented and fascinated Harun since childhood, and, as we will come to see, there is more to the relationship between Harun and Meursault than immediately meets the eye. As Daoud himself said of it in a recent interview:

> It's the same relationship as the decolonised have with the colonisers: a relationship full of fascination and anger; a relationship of resemblance and rejection … This link between Harun and Meursault very much resembles the link that we have in relation to a time, to a coloniser … to a culture … and to ourselves.[5]

And so, the role of 'The Other' as a novel—as a narrative—in this relationship, is central and indispensable, working not only on an individual level (i.e. between the inner lives of Meursault and Harun), but also on a wider, cultural level, as the novel gives insights into the world of the oppressed Other, as well as creating a dialogue with historical oppressors. Thus, we return to the task of this chapter: to attempt to analyse the movements and implications of Daoud's novel, the dialogue it creates between these characters, and between the inseparable and irreconcilable elements of postcolonial identity, as well as relating this to Camus' own aims. The following section will therefore set up a philosophical framework for the task in hand.

3 Franciscan Knowledge and 'What-It's-Like-Ness'

Wandering in Darkness, a recent volume on the problem of suffering by leading figure in philosophy of religion, Eleonore Stump, encompasses an insightful positing of the place of narrative within epistemology. In this influential text, Stump argues for the possibility of gaining knowledge of the Other through narrative engagement. She sets out her conception of two different forms or systems of knowledge, which she labels Franciscan and Dominican. Basing her categorisation on the traditions surrounding

Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, she explains, 'If argument is the coin of the realm for Dominicans, stories fill an analogous role for Franciscans' (Stump 2010, 46). She continues, 'The Dominican system is helpful for making clear distinctions focused on details, about which argument is possible and often frequent' (Stump 2010, 41). This is the kind of knowledge she attributes as the goal of the analytic tradition of philosophy—the kind that can be derived from arguments based on truth claims. On the other hand, narrative and storytelling are central to the Franciscan tradition, and therefore the kind of understanding that can be gained via these means is what she labels 'Franciscan'.

My reading of *Meursault, contre-enquête* posits Harun's reading of 'The Other' as 'Franciscan' within Stump's schema[6]; this is due to the important knowledge and insight that Harun is able to obtain about Meursault (and indeed French Algeria) from reading his text, and the empathy identified by Kirsch as quoted above. For example, there are all kind of facts that could be communicated about Meursault via the Dominican system—such as that he is French-Algerian, that he killed someone, or that he is imprisoned. In philosophical terms, we could use these facts as premises, and by means of weighing up their logical implications, infer further knowledge from these facts. What Dominican knowledge cannot account for, however, is the perspective we gain from encountering his narrative, the subtle moments of understanding and resistance we experience in confronting his story, or the sense we get of Meursault as a person. This is the stuff that cannot be reduced to propositional content (knowledge *that*), or even rigorous argumentation—this is what we mean by Franciscan knowledge.

Stump tells us, 'The author's presentation of the character, if it is well done, makes that character available to us in somewhat the same way the character would have been if he had in fact been directly and immediately present to us' (Stump 2010, 80). Stump of course does not mean 'present' in the physical sense, but as though the character's *personhood* is actually perceptible to us (something which physical presence of course does not necessarily entail). She refers to this effect as a 'second person experience' (Stump 2010, 52)—alike to the experience of being addressed as 'you'. This, I suggest, is how Harun learns from Meursault, and how we in turn learn from both of them: the activity of reading elicits a conscious and

sensitive engagement with their narratives, and we treat them as a people, learning to empathise with their actions and motives—something which is perhaps more difficult when we encounter otherness in real life, as we don't have the benefit of encountering the inner lives of others, as we often do with characters. Through this experience of the Other through the narrative, we are able to gain a kind of intersubjective knowledge; in the presence of the Other, via the text, we are brought to reflect upon our own person, actions, and cultural assumptions.

Following Eleonore Stump,[7] and by way of further illustrating this point, I will reformulate this claim based on a famous thought experiment by the analytic philosopher, Frank Jackson (1982, 127–136). The traditional line of argument goes something like this: Mary is a gifted neuroscientist who knows all there is to know about what happens on a neurological level when a human sees colours. But what is unusual about Mary is that she has spent her entire life living in a black and white room, learning from a black and white screen: Mary has no sense data (or *qualia*) of colours to which she can apply her theoretical knowledge. One day, Mary leaves the room and for the first time she sees a red rose. Jackson suggests that, despite her extensive knowledge of the scientific processes of perceiving colours, upon seeing this rose Mary gains new information about what it is to see the colour red from the experience. This information is phenomenological; it is the 'what-it's-like-ness' of seeing the colour red, equal to Franciscan knowledge.

There are two directions in which Jackson's thought experiment may be applied to my argument. The first is to recognise that Meursault (and indeed readers of *L'Etranger*, and perhaps even Camus himself) is in many ways akin to Mary. Whilst he has a certain amount of knowledge *that*, pertaining to Arabic-Algerians and their culture, he is alienated from them to such a degree that they do not feature as subjects in his worldview, even after he has murdered one. For many readers, the experience of encountering *Meursault, contre-enquête* is something like what Mary experiences when she finally leaves her black and white room and sees that red rose: for the first time it is possible to appreciate 'what-it's-like' for the 'Arab', on both a personal and a cultural level—the powerfulness of this experience is perhaps what has invoked such strong responses from readers such as Fraser's. The second move to make is to see Harun

as being kindred to Mary. The War of Independence made every effort to erase French culture from Algeria, and growing up in an environment which so strongly denied this important period of Algerian history (and the alternative account of French-Algerian people), is equivalent to the black and white room. When Harun discovers 'The Other', he discovers the possibility of a different way of seeing—he discovers 'what-it's-like' for Meursault, and for French-Algerians in general. For us, the readers of both these novels, we are given the opportunity to gain new, Franciscan knowledge from both of these accounts (what-it's-like for both sides of postcolonial Algeria), and this experience is what promotes faith in the Other.

Of course, we must acknowledge that while Harun is reading 'The Other' as a kind of memoir, we read both novels as literary works—and there are certainly some noteworthy implications of this distinction. For example, we must ask ourselves whether it is even appropriate to speak of knowledge in this case, as that brings into question notions of truth (something which is complex enough in itself, but is made even more problematic in reference to an intertextual work such as this). We are also bound to wonder whether reading a text as fiction instead of autobiography makes its moral concerns less persuasive. While these are certainly pertinent questions, I would suggest that they in fact lead us astray from the real project of *Meursault, contre-enquête*—the creation of a dialogue between two alienated perspectives on the same precious homeland, and the sense that this dialogue helps make of the fractured identities of both sides. While we read *L'Etranger* as fiction and Harun reads 'The Other' as factual, both Meursault's story and Harun's are partial and incomplete: they can both be seen as unreliable narrators. This may be seen to throw into question whether what we are talking about should really be called knowledge, but this in fact poses no real problems for the aims of *Meursault, contre-enquête*: the whole point is understanding the contingencies of these differing postcolonial perspectives, not trying to construct any grander idea of truth. By making the text itself of *L'Etranger* a part of Harun's fictional world, Daoud is enabled to call into question the veracity of Meursault's account (as he does on many occasions), highlighting the centrality of this contingency. As for the moral salience of actions performed by fictional characters instead of real human beings,

again we should instead view this as being central to Daoud's endeavour: we as readers are thereby encouraged to enter Harun's fictional world and engage faithfully with the actions of characters as moral agents, treating them with all the seriousness and emotion that we would real people.

4 Knowledge of the Other, from 'The Other'

Let us now use this epistemic framework to look at the novel in more detail, and the issues about which Harun gains Franciscan knowledge through the activity of reading. He describes the revelatory experience of reading 'The Other' for the first time: 'I held it as if spellbound. At one and the same time, I felt insulted and revealed to myself. I spent the whole night reading that book. My heart was pounding, I was about to suffocate, it was like reading a book written by God himself' (Daoud 2015, 130). Harun continues, '[Reading] allowed me to understand, little by little, how your hero saw the world' (Daoud 2015, 132), and for him this is an experience which helps him make sense of his own postcolonial Algerian world. Harun tells us upon reading 'The Other', 'It let me see into the murderer's soul as if I were his angel' (Daoud 2015, 131). In this moment, he begins to recognise the ways in which he is kindred to Meursault, and even their shared humanity. Discovering an affinity between himself and the man he considered an enemy for so long, he refers to the two of them as 'The pair, him and me, the unlikeliest of twins' (Daoud 2015, 3).

In coming to recognise his enemy as a human being, Harun begins to separate the political from the personal. He tells us, 'If you had met me a few decades ago, I would have served you up the version with the prostitute slash Algerian land and the settler who abuses her with repeated rapes and violence. But I've gained some distance now' (Daoud 2015, 62). This does not, of course, make the injustice of colonisation more forgivable, but it does allow Harun to look beyond this context to the individuals behind it. He says, 'When your hero dwells on his mother, I understand him better than I do when he talks about my brother' (Daoud

2015, 36)—Harun can relate to Meursault on a personal level, but the cultural estrangement which consists in Meursault's crime (i.e. his own inability to empathise with the Arabic community) nevertheless separates them. Even in this ineliminable moment of estrangement, however, Harun shows that an awareness of otherness is the key to reflecting on the self. He tells us, 'There's always another, my friend. In love, in friendship, or even on a train, there he is, the other, sitting across from you and staring at you, or turning his back on you and deepening the perspectives of your solitude' (Daoud 2015, 73). This insight is brought into fruition through reading, and it is this element of Harun' experience which I suggest has wider ethical implications. Harun eventually comes to reflect on other judgements he has made of others who inhibited this space between 'us' and 'them' in which he now resides, specifically the Arabic women who (to some extent) were liberated by contact with French culture. He tells us, 'Now there *were* a few skirt-wearing, firm-breasted Algerian women who shuttled between our world and the world of the *roumis*, down into the French neighborhoods. We brats stoned them with our eyes' (Daoud 2015, 19). In acknowledging his own previous lack of understanding, Harun demonstrates the beginnings of an ethical growth.

While Harun of course cannot forgive the murder of his brother, the similarities between himself and Meursault that he discovers in the book enable him to understand—even to empathise—with its protagonist. Indeed, Harun too has blood on his hands—he commits a murder just as lacking in motivation—an act of revenge exacted upon the wrong Frenchman. He seems to relate to the arbitrariness of Meursault's crime, describing how, 'during the summer, when the sun's so close to earth it can make you crazy or even drive you to shed blood' (Daoud 2015, 55)—precisely Meursault's excuse.[8] Again, paraphrasing *L'Etranger*, he describes how the sound of his gun being fired 'was like two sharp raps on the door of deliverance' (Daoud 2015, 85)[9]—where Meursault's crime leads him to be condemned, Harun is freed by its repetition. In this, we see again that Harun's world is the flip-side of Meursault's: while Meursault's crime was thoughtless, Harun's was premeditated; while Musa was murdered at two o'clock in the afternoon, the Frenchman is killed at two o'clock in the morning (Daoud 2015, 79); while Musa remained anonymous, Harun gives his victim a name—Joseph Larquais (Daoud 2015, 88).

Having found that he too is capable of taking a life, he contemplates the act of murder on Meursault's behalf, telling us, 'The Other is a unit of measurement you lose when you kill' (Daoud 2015, 90). Echoing Camus' own critiques of violence and nihilism,[10] Harun discovers for himself that taking a life devalues all human life, including his own—as George Heffernan put it, 'To kill another human being, then, is to kill all human beings. To kill another is also to kill oneself. *Murder is suicide*' (Heffernan 2017, 24). Unlike Meursault, Harun walks free—a fact which brings him no comfort. He says, 'The gratuitousness of Musa's death was unconscionable. And now my revenge had just been struck down to the same level of insignificance (Daoud 2015, 111)'. In the violent context of the War of Independence, the Harun's murder of a Frenchman isn't even treated as a crime. When Harun turns himself in, the police officer questioning him is just as complacent about this murder as Meursault was about Musa's (Daoud 2015, 111), and thus Harun finds himself in the face of the same emptiness and estrangement which so defines Musa's murder.

As we are beginning to see, the Franciscan knowledge that 'The Other' imparts helps Harun to comprehend how he relates to Meursault, and the colonial society the latter represents. Harun is able to identify their cultural points of departure, but in encountering the 'what-it's-like-ness' of Meursault's experiences through reading 'The Other', Harun is also brought to reflect upon his own experience of cultural alienation. He tells us that Meursault is '*el-roumi*, the foreigner, the stranger' (Daoud 2015, 34), and clearly the unhomeliness—the uncanny—of postcolonial Algeria leaves both Meursault and Harun as outsiders. Focusing on Harun's and Meursault's relationship with their homeland itself, Luke Richardson points out the tension which motivates this need for empathy:

> Meursault has rejected an offer to return to Paris choosing instead the pleasure of colonial life, which he enjoys—like swimming, and sunshine. At the beach he and Marie contrast with Masson and his Parisian accented wife, the old generation of French-born immigrants who seem out of place, are pale, overweight, swim poorly. Marie and Meursault are the new generation, born in the country … They are tanned, at home, swim perfectly. The Arabs enter this settled dynamic and instantly disrupt it. Their mere presence is demonstrative that the land Meursault [loves] is not, in fact, his.

> That this new French Algerian identity is founded on an illegitimacy—the illegitimacy of colonial conquest. If he has rejected France, but Algeria rejects him, the *pied noir* is a child of nowhere, a permanent outsider. (Richardson 2015)

Harun most certainly is able to get a sense of this dynamic from his own reading of 'The Other'. He remarks himself, 'How he must have suffered, poor man! To be the child of a place that never gave you birth…' (Daoud 2015, 3). Whilst the text of *Meursault, contre-enquête* revolves around the suffering of Harun and of Arabic Algeria, it also taps into the homelessness of second and third-generation French-Algerians, such as Camus himself.

Similarly, Algeria's linguistic history naturally plays a key role in the way Harun makes sense of the world. Like *L'Etranger*, *Meursault, contre-enquête* was originally written in French. Harun's mother tongue, however, was of course Algerian Arabic, and he talks wistfully about the characteristics of the language, describing it as 'rich, full of imagery, vitality, sudden jolts, and improvisations, but not too big on precision' (Daoud 2015, 37). But, as much as anything else, this novel is about the difficulty of finding a means of communicating the experience of the oppressed,[11] and so Harun 'had to learn a language other than that one. To survive' (Daoud 2015, 37). In order to understand Meursault and his writing, and to communicate his own story, Harun was compelled to learn French. In the act of learning this new language, the language of the coloniser, he is no doubt surrendering something of the Arabic side of his identity, but he also gains a new perspective, a new idea of the duality at the core of his own postcolonial identity. We are told, 'The French language fascinated me like a puzzle, and beyond it lay the solution to the dissonances of my world' (Daoud 2015, 119). He says elsewhere: 'Books and your hero's language gradually enabled me to name things differently and to organise the world with my own words' (Daoud 2015, 37). Through reading Meursault's words, he gains Franciscan knowledge of an alternative perspective of the world. Before colonisation, the Arabic language would have been suitable as a tool for understanding himself and his homeland, but in the fractured postcolonial environment he inhabits, something new—an element of otherness—is necessary. The language that Harun

comes to use reflects this: Harun's French is peppered with Arabic words, giving it a whole new character. Harun explains this choice:

> I've learned to speak this language, and to write in it too … I'm going to do what was done in this country after Independence: I'm going to take the stones from the old houses the colonists left behind, remove them one by one, and build my own house, my own language. (Daoud 2015, 1–2)

Harun's identity, like Algeria's identity, is one shaped and scarred by colonialism. Even now, after Independence, France has not been erased from Algeria; its absence is visceral. Until he learns to read French, he is alienated by his inability to speak the language of the coloniser. Once he reads 'The Other', Harun begins to understand the alienation *of* the coloniser and recognises this as a human experience, one he can relate to.

Via his reading of 'The Other', he also comes to feel kindred to Meursault in his atheism: where Meursault rejects Christianism, Harun rejects Islam. He tells us, 'I'll go as far as to say I abhor all religions. All of them! Because they falsify the weight of the world' (Daoud 2015, 69), echoing Camus' own criticisms of transcendence (as discussed in Chap. 2). A famous scene in *L'Etranger* is the one in which Meursault spends an entire Sunday on his balcony watching the world go by, not leaving the apartment (Camus 2000, 24–28). Conversely, Harun tells us, 'Actually it's Fridays I don't like. I often spend them on the balcony of my apartment, looking at the people, the streets and the mosque' (Daoud 2015, 65). In the final chapter of *L'Etranger*, Meursault unleashes a frustrated tirade at a priest visiting his cell, but Harun tells us, 'In my case, there's a whole pack of religious fanatics hounding me' (Daoud 2015, 139), referring to the dogma of Islam in Algeria since Independence. These complex encounters between the cultures of France and Arabic Algeria forge the traits which (in some ways) define the personalities of Harun and Meursault—and through reading 'The Other' Harun realises just how kindred they are. He tells us: 'I was looking for traces of my brother in the book, and what I found instead was my own reflection, I discovered I was practically the murderer's double … [It was like a] mirror held up to my soul and to what would become of me in this country, between Allah and ennui' (Daoud 2015, 131). In the final scene of the book, he

recounts the time that an imam tried to talk to him about God, and it is here that he once and for all merges with Meursault, quoting *L'Etranger* at some points word for word; both voices speak at once from a place of otherness and estrangement (Daoud 2015, 140–142). While both Harun and Meursault are kindred in their irreligiousness, in the following section I will examine my claim that, through narrative engagement, Harun is able to benefit from a different kind of faith.

5 Faith and Redemption: Meursault's Defence

The system of difference that Harun is able to create (through Franciscan knowledge) enables him to relate to Meursault, but that is only the first movement made in this dialogue between supposed enemies. At the core of Harun's identity is a profound sense of guilt—not only the guilt he feels for outliving his brother Musa, or indeed for his own poorly justified violence, but also for abandoning the religion and the political cause so important to many Algerians of his generation (i.e. Islam and the fight for Independence). For readers today, it is easy enough to sympathise with Harun, as the injustice of colonialism can no longer be ignored; Harun need not be redeemed. However, my analysis of *Meursault, contre-enquête* depends on us achieving something which is perhaps more difficult—that is, learning to understand and re-humanise the apparently conscienceless coloniser. While we have already seen some evidence for the painful alienation of second-generation French-Algerians, we are likely to encounter more resistance when trying to reconcile Meursault himself, due to his indefensible crime; Harun, however, is able to sympathise and relate to Meursault. This section, therefore, will highlight several instances of Camus' novel which might enable readers of Meursault's narrative to sympathise with him in a way which would not be possible without engagement with his narrative (i.e. if we were in the position of his jury). In keeping with this chapter's non-religious application of Franciscan knowledge, and harkening back to my discussion of

faith in Chap. 2, I will explore the effect of Meursault's narrative in terms of 'faith in the Other'.

Meursault's own guilt, and lack of awareness of it, is of course central to *L'Etranger*. Meursault kills a human being and believes himself to be innocent until he sees himself through the eyes of his jury, When at last he tells us, 'for the first time I realized that I was guilty' (Camus 2000, 87). His lack of remorse towards the 'the Arab' is not only important in the text itself, it is also the lynch-pin of many readings of *Meursault, contre-enquête*.[12] However, there are many times when, as readers of *L'Etranger*, we (and Harun) are able to identify the fact that Meursault does indeed have a conscience, and while he often appears to repress it, is has an undeniable effect on his behaviour. For example, when his mother dies, he feels compelled to apologise to his boss when he needs to ask for time off work. He says, 'It's not my fault' (Camus 2000, 9), betraying a feeling of guilt towards his mother for having relinquished her care. When he arrives at her retirement home and meets the warden, his guilty conscience once again resurfaces and we are told, 'I felt as if he was reproaching me' (Camus 2000, 10). We also know that she was bored and unhappy living with her young son—he tells us, 'When she was at home, she used to spend all her time watching me in silence' (Camus 2000, 11), but that he never adjusts to her absence from his apartment, instead living like Miss Havisham in the debris of another life. He tells us:

> It was just right when mother was here. But now it's too big for me and I've had to move the dining-room table into my bedroom. I live in just this one room now, with some rather saggy cane chairs, a wardrobe with a mirror that's gone yellow, a dressing-table and a brass bed. The rest is a mess. (Camus 2000, 25)

While his living like a hermit in his own house may yet again stem from a feeling of guilt towards his mother, this certainly shows that when the prosecutor at Meursault's trial accuses him of 'burying his mother like a heartless criminal' (Camus 2000, 93), he has missed something that we (and indeed Harun) have not. In these moments of recognition, we are able to develop a kind faith in Meursault, compelled by (as Stump would

put it) a second-person experience of him through narrative. This is how he is redeemed in Harun's eyes.

Of course, Meursault's defence in court is undeniably weak. He cannot account for the evidence against him, and he is unwilling to embellish his story to gain the sympathy of the court. The reason that Meursault is unable to make his jury understand his lack of motive is because, we might say, he tells *the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth*. Throughout the novel, the style that Camus uses to construct Meursault's story is clipped and matter-of-fact. Thanks to the imaginative activity required by reading the novel, we as readers are able to get a sense of him as a person—but in court the simplicity of his testimony fails him. All that can be inferred from Meursault's clumsy and brief account is his guilt. It is precisely for this reason that Camus can claim, somewhat controversially, that 'one wouldn't be far wrong in seeing *The Outsider* as the story of a man who, without any heroic pretensions, agrees to die for the truth' (Camus 2000, 119). It is obvious to any reader of *L'Etranger* that something is missing from Meursault's testimony—he fails to engage his audience's (the jury's) imagination and therefore they are unable to put themselves in his position, whereas we readers can. Under the scrutiny of the theatrical, persuasive, and emotive show of his prosecutor, Meursault's estrangement in the courtroom turns into demonisation. The failure of Meursault's truthful account of his crime to gain any allies is what really represents the absurd in this novel: the conflict between faith and reason. From our faith in Meursault (cultivated by imaginative engagement), we as readers cannot fail to feel for him, to be horrified by his fate and frustrated when his words fail him. Here we see that sometimes the facts aren't enough when attempting to determine something as nebulous as justice. It is precisely this effect that Eleonore Stump is pointing towards in her critique of Dominican systems of knowledge. Ethical understanding can be extraneous to factual information, which is why no jury would acquit Meursault. By failing to appeal to the emotions and sympathy of the jury he allowed himself to become an outsider—they are unable to read him in the way that Harun is.

In the colonial moment that Meursault (and indeed Camus) inhabited, there is little opportunity to reflect on one's life through the eyes of the oppressed other (i.e. the Arabic-Algerian community). This is precisely

what is missing from *L'Etranger*. Harun, however, is given the opportunity, through reading 'The Other', to look at Algeria through a lens that is less fractured than the postcolonial one through which he normally sees. While this alternative lens has its blind-spots (such as 'the Arab' himself), it enables Harun to see what has been erased by the War of Independence, and this flip-side makes Harun's own world view more complete, more cohesive. It is for this reason that 'The Other' represents the necessity for Harun of making sense of the colonised self through the engagement with the colonised Other. While we may be able to forgive Harun his faults easily enough, until he has read 'The Other', he is crippled by his own guilt—guilt for the ways in which he feels alienated from Arabic Algeria. After reading Meursault's story, however, he not only re-humanises his brother's killer, he also finds redemption for his own guilt towards his culture and mother country, coming to understand that his fractured identity is a product of an (until that moment) invisible Other. It is Meursault, this Other, in which his faith finds purchase.

6 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that, through attaining Franciscan knowledge from encountering literary narrative, readers are able to engage in a kind of non-religious faith-building practice, something which I have applied to both Daoud's and Camus' novels. At the centre of *Meursault, contre-enquête* is Harun and Meursault's homeland, Algeria, and the many cultural conflicts that the country is so familiar with. Naturally, these issues play an important role in many readings of this text, but instead of simply being a critique of Camus' colonial blinkers, I have suggested that the contrasts between Meursault and Harun (French-Algerian and Arab-Algerian) are deployed as part of a wider ethical venture; this novel is most definitely about postcolonial identity, but it has ethical implications which can move beyond this context, as well as link it back to Camus' own works. It is about coming to understand a common humanity which transcends the dichotomy of colonised/coloniser. As Kamel Daoud put it, 'What interests me is humanity, not their passports' (Daoud 2017).[13]

What Harun in *Meursault, contre-enquête* learns from Meursault in *L'Etranger* is not that Meursault's beliefs or perspective on the world is more accurate or justified than his own; instead he learns the *possibility* of Meursault's perspective and comes to understand the causes and effects of such a perspective. The otherness of this perspective thereby throws his own into sharp relief, and the sameness and difference he experiences through the text help him to learn both about himself and about the Other. This understanding, I suggest, helps Harun to rebuild faith in his life; he acquires faith in the Other, and despite the fractured postcolonial perspective he inhabits, he is able to transcend his sense of estrangement and to re-humanise Meursault. In this sense, Daoud carries on Camus' own venture of promoting intersubjective ethical reflection, using the backdrop of postcolonial Algeria to provide a plethora of self/other distinctions. When we read these two novels side by side, it becomes much easier to appreciate the trauma present on both sides of colonialism, the alienation and fragmentation of identity that the inheritors of colonialism experience, but it also shows that sometimes, literary dialogues between oppressed and oppressor such as these can enable us to *relate to* and *have faith in* those we may otherwise consider our enemy.

Notes

1. This chapter is adapted from an earlier article originally published in *Literature and Theology*, under the title '"What-It's-Like" for the *Other*: Narrative Knowledge and Faith in *The Meursault Investigation*' (Whistler 2018). I am much indebted to Oxford University Press for granting me permission to revisit this material here.
2. This discussion of non-religious faith draws upon the earlier one in Chap. 2.
3. A trend sparked by Cruise O'Brien (1970) and Saïd (1993).
4. In French, 'L'Autre'.
5. Daoud in an interview with Maciej Kałuża (2017). In French: 'Je crois que c'est le même rapport qu'ont les décolonisés avec les colonisateurs: un rapport plein de fascination et de colère; un rapport de ressemblance et de rejet. Je pense que ce lien entre Haroun et Meursault regarde

profondément le lien qu'on a vis-à-vis d'une époque et d'un colonisateur et d'une culture. Et un rapport avec nous-mêmes.'

6. From a postcolonial perspective, it might seem somewhat problematic to utilise a category from the Christian tradition in the analysis of a text which challenges the erasure of 'the Arab' in *L'Etranger*, but despite Stump's background in Christian theology, she is trying to make a broad claim about the possibility of learning from narrative (rather than just saying something specific about scripture), and so her choice of terminology is unfortunate, but incidental to the philosophical point being made. At this point it also seems pertinent to emphasise the fact that, although *Meursault, contre-enquête* challenges colonialism and Christianity, it is also critical of conservative Islam and its categorical rejection of the European influences on Algerian culture (more will be said on this matter in Sect. 4).
7. Other discussions, in the context of epistemology, of understanding gained through engagement with literature, include Eleonore Stump's use of examples from Trollope's Palliser novels (Stump 2010, 53), and László Kajtár's recent article, 'What Mary Didn't Read: Literary Narratives and Knowledge' (2016), in which he uses a similar reconstruction to describe the phenomenon of fear of death experienced upon reading Cormack McCarthy's *The Road*.
8. Meursault tells us, 'Mixing up my words a bit and realizing that I sounded ridiculous, I said quickly that it was because of the sun. Some people laughed' (Camus 2000, 99).
9. Compared to Meursault's 'it was like giving four sharp knocks on the door of unhappiness' (Camus 2000, 60).
10. Camus wrote in one version of the introduction to *L'Homme révolté*, 'Murder is the same thing as suicide … absolute nihilism, that which accepts suicide, also accepts murder' (In French, 'Meurtre et suicide sont même chose … Le nihilisme absolu, celui qui accepte le suicide, accepte aussi le meurtre.') (Camus 2006, III: 1240–1241).
11. For further reading on the possibility of communication in the context of colonisation, see Spivak (1988).
12. For example, Brozgal's (2016), and Fraser's (2015), as previously mentioned.
13. In French: 'ce qui m'intéresse, c'est l'homme, pas son passeport'.

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8

Conclusion: Ethics Through Interdisciplinarity

As we saw in the introduction to this book, numerous theorists (such as Arthur C. Danto (1984), Berel Lang (1990), Martha Nussbaum (1983, 1990, 1995), and Jon Stewart (2013)) have expressed dissatisfaction with the current homogeneity in academic philosophical style. While we have seen some strong arguments for not collapsing the difference between philosophy and literature entirely (such as Richard Posner's (1997)), I have endeavoured to show that some literature (in this case Camus') can make a fruitful contribution to the way we think about and tackle moral problems. I believe that the key to recognising this is to maintain that there are indeed differences between philosophical and literary writing conventions, and that this is by no means a bad thing. Therefore, we should manage our expectations accordingly when it comes to assessing the value of philosophical or literary texts. Analytic philosophical texts provide rigour and clarity—they help us to focus in on the specifics of moral quandaries and assess the value of our responses to these problems using our powers of reason—this is of course an extremely valuable tool, and at no point in this book have I hoped to disprove the value of reason. However, while literature cannot hope to offer the same kind of precision when it comes to tackling philosophical problems, if can offer provocative

G. Whistler, *Camus' Literary Ethics*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37756-4_8

illustrations of moral problems in all their nuance and subtlety. If we accept that literature is unlikely to present its arguments in the same way as conventional philosophical treatise, we are able to focus instead on the things that literature can do—that is, the subtle techniques which elicit philosophical reflection, without, as Nussbaum puts it, hoping to 'wrest … clarity from the obscure' (Nussbaum 1990, 282). I suggest, therefore, that in supplementing traditional philosophical writing styles with more creative methods, moral philosophy can take advantage of these different approaches, allowing for both nuance and precision.

Of course, in the history of philosophy there are numerous examples of philosophers writing before the arising of such uniformity, and no doubt one could spend a lifetime trying to pinpoint the innumerable techniques that philosophers have drawn on to bring their subject matter to life, so to speak. In this book, however, I have contented myself with selecting just one philosopher who seems to me to have taken the relationship between form and content in moral philosophy, and pretty much made a career out of toying with it—that is, Albert Camus. In order to demonstrate such a claim, I have presented a series of case studies of the techniques he utilises and offered some analysis of how these might be effective. I don't doubt that there are in fact more instances of his stylistic innovation which have yet to be studied in such a way, but I believe that this book fills a considerable gap—not only within Camus scholarship, but also in reference to debates around the genre(s) of moral philosophy.

As we have seen, Camus didn't just experiment with philosophical style (as indeed all writers do, to some extent)—he also explicitly condemned philosophy's reliance on reason alone. This critique is the basis for his endeavour to formulate alternative means of provoking philosophical reflection—ones that don't just rely on reason, but also stimulate compassion and empathy. Of course, we might say that emotions can be just as dangerous as false reasoning (and I am not about to argue with that), but for Camus, positive emotional responses are at the heart of all ethics, and so he wanted to find ways of doing philosophy which were able to draw upon them in a constructive way. This is the reason for which he turned to literature.

At this stage, we have looked at numerous efforts on the part of Camus to weave philosophical content with form. We have seen, for example (in Chap. 4), how he composed fables and allegories to demonstrate the value of solidarity, or to critique existentialism's nihilistic tendencies. We have also seen (in Chap. 5) how he used dialogues to encourage reflection on ethical quandaries. For the most part, it would be unrepresentative to call these encounters with his philosophy strictly argumentative, but they nevertheless present us with moral and philosophical problems and offer us a way to engage with and reflect upon the issues being addressed. At no stage in this book have I suggested that these methods are the only, or ideal, ones for approaching moral problems. Rather, I have analysed these methods as a means of demonstrating Camus' aims as a writer and a philosopher—that is, to establish alternative means of approaching moral and philosophical problems. Considering the success of these methods, I suggest that contemporary ethical theory would benefit greatly from a diversification in method, and that much can be learned from Camus' own attempts.

What I have not ventured to suggest, however, is how we might be able to implement such a diversification. It would be unreasonable to propose that contemporary moral philosophers should change their preferred styles of writing, based on any claim that there are other effective modes of ethical communication—I would not like to be accused of 'turning an is into an ought', as it were. What I would like to see change, however, is the vehemence with which alternative writing styles are rejected in the world of academic philosophical writing. When it is claimed that philosophy is a 'dead discipline', as sadly it often is, it is at least in part due to the apparent stagnation that professionalisation has caused. No longer is philosophy the product of years of solitary reflection, or of dialogue in the market place—instead, it is a career which, like many others, conjures images of conference centres and corporate bureaucracy. If philosophy is to survive its ever more unstable status in the current academic and financial climate, an influx of diversity and creativity in methods would surely be a step in the right direction.

Setting aside this somewhat tangential meditation on the future of philosophy as a discipline, I will conclude by revisiting a famous quote from Camus which illuminates the relationship between philosophy and

literature. As I have cited earlier on in the book, he claimed that 'a novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images' (Camus 2006, I: 794). What he says here is undoubtedly true—every novel (at least the good ones) contains some element of philosophy, whether it be the philosophical worldview of the author or the themes it incorporates into its subject matter. This is hardly contentious, and Camus' own novels are of course particularly good examples of how novels can deal with philosophical problems. However, Camus also tries to reinstate the reverse—that is, the literary elements of philosophical writing. Having offered arguments for the diversification of philosophical style, as well as numerous examples of literary techniques that provoke moral reflection, I hope by now to have demonstrated why this is surely a good thing.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

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