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# MEURSAULT (AND CALIGULA) AVEC DE SADE: ON THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LITERARY ABSURDS AND CAMUS'S PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSES

by Matthew Sharpe

What exactly is the relationship between Camus's analysis of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the fictional "absurds," the drama *Caligula* (1938, then 1944), and *The Outsider* (1941)? And what, more widely, is the relationship between Camus's fiction and his philosophical thought? Why is it that critics can agree that his novels are 'philosophical', at the same time as academic philosophers tend to dismiss him as too literary, or—following Sartre—as a philosophical lightweight?<sup>1</sup> Sartre's remarkable "Explication of the *Stranger*", still arguably one of the astutest responses to *L'Étranger*, at several points approaches a comparatively simple picture that other readers have not failed to develop: "Camus distinguishes, as we have mentioned, between the notion and the feeling of the absurd," Sartre writes: "*The Myth of Sisyphus* might be said to aim at giving us this idea, and *The Stranger* at giving us this feeling."<sup>2</sup> On this reading, Meursault becomes something like an "illustration" of the absurd feeling, and as such, of the philosophical ideas concerning this feeling that Camus developed in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, his

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Camus' *Outsider*", in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* translated by Annette Michelson (Great Britain: Hutchinson & Co., 1968), 26; Jean-Paul Sartre, "Response to Albert Camus" in *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation* edited and translated by David A. Spritzen (New York: Humanity books, 2004), 145.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Camus' *Outsider*", 32.

philosophical essay on the absurd. Sartre can thereby deem *Le Mythe*, in one of its registers, as almost a commentary on *L'Étranger*:

We are, of course, assured that he is absurd and his predominant characteristic is a pitiless clarity. Besides, he is, in more ways than one, constructed so as to furnish a concerted illustration of the theories expounded in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.<sup>3</sup>

Many readers, whether in enthusiastic sympathy or something closer to moral anxiety, have assumed that Camus must have wanted to present Meursault and/or Caligula as ethical paradigms for new generations to emulate: honest before a godless, chaotic universe. However unlikely the idea seems when stated in direct language, and when we acknowledge the conduct of Albert Camus's own life, we are asked by such readings to see Camus's anomic anti-hero condemned to die for senselessly shooting an Arab ("the only Christ we deserve"<sup>4</sup>), or a crazed theatrical Emperor who dedicates himself to terrorising his own population, as the kinds of amoral existential termini to which Camus's new, post-theological thought would lead us. Hence, to give one example, the eminent philosopher Robert Solomon tells us about *The Outsider* that:

Meursault is a philosophically fantastic character who, for the first part of the novel, is an ideal Sartrean pre-reflective consciousness, pure experience without reflection ... but then, in the second part of the novel [after he is imprisoned and condemned to be executed] ... [the] threat of imminent death forces him into a Heideggerian celebration of the

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Camus' *Outsider*", 30. Cf. at 28, *Le Mythe* is described as providing "the theory of the novel of absurdity"; at 29, *The Stranger* is a "philosophical translation of his fictional message". Cf. Matthew Lamb, "Re-examining Sartre's Reading of *The Myth of Sisyphus*", *Philosophy Today* 56, 1 (Feb. 2012), 102. But cf. also Sartre, "Camus' *Outsider*", 29-30: "... and Meursault, the hero of *The Outsider*, remains ambiguous, even to the reader who is familiar with the theories of the absurd." Lamb arguably over-simplifies Sartre's review, in order the better to differentiate his own position.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, "Preface to the American edition of *The Outsider*", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 337.

'privilege of death' and the 'happy death' which is a constant theme to Camus' novels ...<sup>5</sup>

Differently, the Christian critic Paul Archambault in *Camus' Hellenic Sources* makes the argument that it is less Meursault than Caligula, hero of Camus's first most successful play, who shows us the truth of Camus's rebellion against metaphysical thought. He sees in Camus's Caligula's crazed longing, after the death of his lover-sister Drusilla, to bring the moon down to earth, make the sun set in the East, and achieve a kind of dark benediction through embracing evil<sup>6</sup> so many proofs that, with Camus, the Church is still confronting avatars of its ancient Gnostic foe. "The gnostic themes of cosmic evil, of liberation through knowledge, and of the need for an initiating teacher" are all present in *Caligula*, Archambault observes. And they are all in his eyes so many "forerunners of modern nihilism," like to that which he sees as characteristic of Camus.<sup>7</sup>

The issue of the precise relation between the different "absurds," as Camus called them<sup>8</sup>, continues to divide commentators. For, at the opposite end of the spectrum to Sartre or Archambault, we find positions like that of Thomas Hanna who argues that:

Those who have tried to make a direct correspondence between the novel and the subsequent philosophical essays succeed only in confusing the proper structure of this novel, which deals with the absurd, but in a manner completely independent of the essays.<sup>9</sup>

Again, Champigny's book on *L'Étranger*, which does not mention *Le Mythe*, is animated by the sense that "Meursault had to be

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<sup>5</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts: Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Camus, "Caligula", in *Caligula and Other Plays* (London: Pnenguin, 2007), 39-40, 45, 48.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Archambault, *Camus' Hellenic Sources* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1972), 120, 134.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Camus, *Carnets I. Mai 1935 – Février 1942* (Paris : Les Éditions Gallimard, 1962), 224.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 55.

pried from Sisyphus ... [and] a conception of Meursault which was still current at the time ...": the idea that he was "a likely personification of the ideas of the absurd formulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*..."<sup>10</sup> For Matthew Lamb more recently, neither Hanna nor Champigny go far enough in asserting the autonomy of Meursault from Sisyphus, or Camus's novel from his philosophical essay, if that is what we should agree to call *Le Mythe*. Reading *The Myth of Sisyphus* in light of *L'Étranger*, Lamb argues, would show us that Camus was not concerned even in the latter with developing a discursive philosophy. He was writing an ethics. So far is the 1942 essay away from being a commentary or illumination of Meursault's motivations and fate in Camus's famous 1941 novella.<sup>11</sup>

This essay wants to examine, once more, the relationship between Camus's philosophical writings and *L'Étranger* in particular, in the hope of treading a new and "measured," middle ground in these debates. We agree, to some extent, with Lamb and his type of reading which resists seeing Camus's fiction as merely illustrative of a preformed philosophy. As Lamb notes, Camus's explicit resistance to the idea that great literature could ever be like a "thesis-novel", playing out conceptual thought equally expressible in the dispassionate, denotational language of a treatise, needs to be foregrounded in any reflections on this issue.<sup>12</sup> "The thesis-novel, the work that proves, [is] the most hateful of all," Camus writes in *Le Mythe de Sisyphus*, in a tone which is unusually hostile for him. The reason is that it:

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Champigny, *A Pagan Hero* trans. Rowe Portis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 109.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Lamb, "Re-examining Sartre's Reading of *The Myth of Sisyphus*", 100-111. We leave aside the difficult issue of how an ethics can be written which excludes the philosophical dimension as totally as Lamb is concerned to secure. Certainly, in interview Camus could proclaim: "*Je ne suis pas un philosophe. Je ne crois pas assez à la raison pour croire à un système. Ce que m'intéresse, c'est de savoir comment il faut se conduire* [what interests me is how it is necessary to conduct oneself]," at Albert Camus, *Albert Camus Oeuvres Complètes II 1944-1948*. (Paris: Gallimard Bibliothèque de la Pléiade: 2006), 659. But it can be disputed whether this excludes the formation of philosophical discourse about possible modes of conduct, as in *Le Mythe*, or instead necessitates it in a thoughtful man like Camus.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Lamb, "Re-examining Sartre's Reading of *The Myth of Sisyphus*", esp. 107-110.

... is ... most often is inspired by a smug thought. You demonstrate the truth you feel sure of possessing ... [Yet] the great novelists are philosophical novelists—that is, the contrary of thesis-writers. For instance, Balzac, Sade, Melville, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Proust, Malraux, Kafka, to cite but a few ...<sup>13</sup>

Camus's criticism of the idea of the philosophical "thesis-novel" also, we note, underlay his criticism of Jean-Paul Sartre's own first novel, *Nausea*. In this remarkable novel, the young Camus suggested, the "balance" between philosophical ideas and literary creation is "broken." So "the theories do damage to the life."<sup>14</sup> However much the same criticism haunted Camus himself—and can arguably be made of the dramas *Le Malentendu* and *Les Justes*, and his great novel *La Peste*—Camus's hostility towards the idea of novels simply illustrating preformed philosophies should indeed, as Lamb stresses<sup>15</sup>, put on our guard against assuming that Camus wanted the fictional absurds to merely illustrate the theoretical notions he developed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Then there are more general concerns about identifying an author with any one of his multiple characters, even within a given work. Camus in *L'Étranger* is after all the creator not simply of Meursault, but Raymond, Masson, Marie; Celeste, and *maman*; and in *Caligula* of Caligula but also Cherea, Caesonia, and Scipio etc. Shakespeare is not simply Hamlet, but also the creator of Ophelia, Horatio, and all the other denizens of Hamlet's Denmark, *Cymbeline's* Cassibulan, and over 30 other settings. To identify an author with any of one of his character, even his heroes, is problematic. On this point, Camus's essay on Roger Martin du Gard gives a revealing insight into Camus's reflections on his own artistic practice:

A novelist certainly expresses and betrays himself through all of his characters at the same time: each of them

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<sup>13</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1942), 137-8.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Camus, "Review of *La Nausée*", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 199.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Lamb, "Re-examining Sartre's Reading of *The Myth of Sisyphus*", esp. 107-110.

represents one of his tendencies or his temptations. Martin du Gard is or has been Jacques, just as he is or has been Antoine: the words he gives them are sometimes his own, sometimes not ...<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, "absurd creation" is the header for Part III of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, a section wherein Camus goes some way to denying a hard-and-fast distinction between philosophy and literature, as Cruickshank has stressed.<sup>17</sup> Camus certainly numbered *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* alongside *L'Étranger* and *Caligula* in his first cycle of the "absurd," completed on February 21, 1941, as the *Carnets* tells us.<sup>18</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus* does at one point describe the absurd feeling as involving the sense of oneself a "stranger" in a world "suddenly deprived of illusions and lights." And, whatever else we say about it, something like this feeling (as the novel's title suggests) is the predominant affect of Meursault in the *roman* until the very final scene: a feeling which everywhere until then pervades Meursault's dispassionate, almost bemused, narration of the things that befell him after the unheralded death of *maman*, yesterday or the day before. If any simplistic "*The Stranger* illustrates *The Myth*"-type thesis cannot stand, contra some of Sartre's remarks; then neither will a too strong disavowal of any link between this novel or its contemporary drama *Caligula* and Camus's developing philosophical position. Here as everywhere else, that is, Camus's position is complex or two-sided, and "nothing is true which compels us to exclude."<sup>19</sup>

In order to resolve things more positively, this essay wants—after some further examination of Camus's statements concerning literary art, and his own complex aesthetic make-up (Part 1)—to propose that Camus's Meursault and *Caligula* do not represent in any way absurd paradigms or ideals: if by that we mean that they should be numbered alongside Don Juan, the actor, conqueror or creator in *Le Mythe*, those "princes without a kingdom" who "know

<sup>16</sup> Albert Camus, "On Roger Martin du Gard", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 271-272.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 132-3; cf. John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (New York: Oxford UP, 1959), 143.

<sup>18</sup> Albert Camus, *Carnets I Mai 1935-Février 1942*, 224.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Camus, "Return to Tipasa", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 165.

how to live in harmony with a universe without future and without weakness ..."<sup>20</sup> In his defence, Sartre does acknowledge this momentarily, when he writes that, had Camus wanted, he might

... have related the life of one of those saints of the Absurd, so dear to his heart, of whom he speaks in *The Myth of Sisyphus* ... But he has not done so, and Meursault, the hero of *The Stranger*, remains ambiguous, even to the reader who is familiar with theories of the absurd ...<sup>21</sup>

So what then do we think Meursault and Caligula are doing in Camus's *oeuvre*, if they are not there to illustrate the absurd, or exemplify in literary clothing ideals of lives lived well and truly in face of the absurd?

Our thesis follows, on the one hand, the thread of Camus's comment concerning Roger Martin du Gard, that a writers' characters represent "tendencies or temptations" to which he or she has been subject. It cannot be stressed too much just how much of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and of *L'Homme Révolté* are given over to examining what the first text critiques as metaphorical (or metaphysical) "suicide," and the later text criticises as the metaphysical bases of ideological vindications of murder.<sup>22</sup> This side (or, as it were, either side) of living lucidly with the absurd, *Le Mythe* argues, are those "leaps" which accept either that life *must* have an absolute Meaning, or that it—equally absolutely—*cannot* have any such meaning, outside of forms of irrationalism or fideism.<sup>23</sup> In *The Rebel*, likewise, the *pensée du midi* is a permanent possibility that is hemmed in between forms of absolute affirmation of *le monde, comme il va*, including natural and human evil; and absolute negations of it, which vindicate murder as a righteous protest against the indignities we are made, by God or Nature to endure.<sup>24</sup> The point is that it is very possible that Camus's fictions, if they illustrate any

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<sup>20</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 126.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Camus' *Outsider*", 30.

<sup>22</sup> Camus, *Le Mythe*, 17-26; then 48-74; Albert Camus, *L'Homme Révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 39-135; 137-313.

<sup>23</sup> Camus, *Le Mythe*, 48-74.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. esp. "Nihilisme et Histoire", in Albert Camus, *L'Homme Révolté*, 131-135.

philosophical notions, have set out to illustrate the “temptation” he wants, ethically, to stage for us but resist: the temptation, for instance, to deify the Irrational like Shestov, Jaspers or Kierkegaard in *Le Mythe*; or the tendency to valorise crime as a form of metaphysical protest, as Camus accuses the romantics and surrealists of doing in *The Rebel*, alongside the Marquis de Sade.<sup>25</sup>

And, with the introduction of Sade, we arrive at the second component to our argument. This component points towards Camus's proximities and distances from the famous pieces written on the tortured Marquis by Adorno and Horkheimer and the great French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan.<sup>26</sup> Our hypothesis, put simply, is that Camus in *Caligula* and *L'Étranger* has presented us with characters who embody something very like the irrationalist positions Camus critiques in his important sections of *L'Homme Révolté* devoted to reflecting on how Sade's protest against all order led him, by a strange perversion, to dream up proto-concentration camps given over to the joyless pursuit of sexual joy. While in *Caligula's* case, the comparison can be made with some directness, we might say that Meursault is more like a “passive Sadean”, if this irony can be allowed to stand: less a willing executioner of what too much philosophical and theological *paideia* had allowed him to suppose Nature or God must desire, than unable to keep the murderous Nature carried in the North African sun at bay, when the decisive moment comes, standing on the beach with a gun in his hand.

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<sup>25</sup> Camus, *Le Mythe*, 53-63; *L'Homme Révolté*, 57-86, 109-130. For Camus's response to André Breton's defence of the romantics, and Camus's reaffirmations of his position, cf. “Révolte et conformisme” and “Révolte et conformisme (suite)”, in *Albert Camus Oeuvres Complètes II 1948-1956* (Gallimard Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: 2008), 392-396.

<sup>26</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality”, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2002), 63-93; Jacques Lacan, “Kant with Sade”, in in: *Jacques Lacan: Écrits – The first complete edition in English'* translated by Bruce Fink (London: W.W. Norton & Co: 2005), 645-669.

## 1. Camus's absurd creation: between testimony, myth, and ascesis

The continuing debates concerning the relationship of Camus's art and philosophy of course reflect wider, continuing debates about these two genii of human activity, reaching back to Plato's ruminations on the already "ancient quarrel" of the philosophers with the poets.<sup>27</sup> Camus, at times, disavows that he is a philosopher at all: "Why I am an artist and not a philosopher?", Camus asks himself rhetorically in the *Carnets* of October 1945: "Because I think by words and not by ideas."<sup>28</sup> Yet at times, Camus's disavowals seem less disingenuous than almost ironic, as when he comments that what decides the issue, against his being a philosopher, is that he is interested in how to live: thus reprising *the* Socratic question at the basis of most later antique thought.<sup>29</sup> And, as Cruickshank has commented, *The Myth of Sisyphus'* account of "absurd creation" contains moments where the art-philosophy distinction is almost wholly collapsed, or declared "arbitrary". In an age wherein the possibility of a Spinozist system has been discredited at least, Camus argues:

... to anyone who is convinced of the mind's singleness of purpose, nothing is more futile than these distinctions based on methods and objects. There are no frontiers between the disciplines that man sets himself for understanding and loving. They interlock, and the same anxiety merges them ...<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 607b.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Camus, *Carnets II, 1942-1951* trans. with Introduction & notes by Philip Thody (London:

Hamish Hamilton, 1966), 73.

<sup>29</sup> "Je ne suis pas un philosophe. Je ne crois pas assez à la raison pour croire à un système. Ce que m'intéresse, c'est de savoir comment il faut se conduire [what interests me is to know how we must conduct ourselves]," at Albert Camus, *Albert Camus Oeuvres Complètes II 1944-1948*, 659.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 132-3; see note 17 above.

Two arguments concerning art run through *Le Mythe*, which are condensed in this important statement. Firstly, taking up the Socratic interest in how to live, Camus throughout his career will remain reflectively interested in the activity of producing art, as one of the possible ways a person can choose to live their life. A novelist and man of the theatre himself (another of his absurd men is the actor<sup>31</sup>), this is a question dear to his own heart. Whatever an artist may produce, his pursuit of artistic creation for Camus is also a form of “care of the self” or “philosophy as a way of life”, to borrow key terms from more recent French thinkers<sup>32</sup>:

Elsewhere I have brought out the fact that human will had no other purpose than to maintain awareness. But that could not do without discipline. Of all the schools of patience and lucidity, creation is the most effective ... It calls for a daily effort, self-mastery, a precise estimate of the limits of truth, measure, and strength. It constitutes an *ascesis*. All that “for nothing,” in order to repeat and mark time! But perhaps the great work of art has less importance in itself than in the ordeal it demands of a man and the opportunity it provides him of overcoming his phantoms and approaching a little closer to his naked reality.<sup>33</sup>

Second is the argument that a specifically “absurd creation” – remembering that not all art is absurd creation, since artists are subject to the same temptations to “escape” as everyone else – can survive the absurd *skepsis* more or less unscathed. The reason is that such art, as opposed to that of the thesis-novelists or artists like

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<sup>31</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 108-116.

<sup>32</sup> On “care of the self,” see for instance Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982* translated by Graham Burchell (London: Picador, 2005); and Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life* translated by Michael Chase (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996); on Camus’s proximity to this conception of philosophy, see M. Sharpe, “Camus’ *Askesis*: Reading Camus, in Light of the *Carnets*”, *Philosophical Practice*, March 2013, 8.1: 1149-1164; and for a critique from a Christian perspective, Woolfolk, Alan. 1986. “The Artist as Cultural Guide: Camus’ Post-Christian Asceticism” *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Summer 1986), pp. 93-110.

<sup>33</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 155-156.

Dostoevsky who commit their versions of “philosophical suicide”<sup>34</sup>, deigns to explain, so much as to describe, the worlds it fathoms forth before readers. Absurd art, or art produced by a thinker who wishes to remain true only to what we can know, cling to the concrete: “At a certain point where thought turns back on itself, they raise up the images of their works like the obvious symbols of a limited, mortal, and rebellious thought...”<sup>35</sup> Aware of their inability to totalise the field of human experience, they embrace the sheer diversity of what is given, this side of a total *explanans*:

Any thought that abandons unity glorifies diversity. And diversity is the home of art. The only thought to liberate the mind is that which leaves it alone, certain of its limits and of its impending end. No doctrine tempts it. It awaits the ripening of the work and of life ...<sup>36</sup>

Camus is here drawing on an entire line of his various philosophical reflections on artistic creation dating back to his earliest published statements and his 1931 encounter in particular with *La Douleur* by André Richaud, Camus was attracted to the model of art as a kind of bearing witness or *témoignage* to all of experience, even experiences usually considered too insignificant to merit polite or philosophical attention. From Richaud, Camus tells us that he learnt that literature could dispense more than forgetfulness or entertainment<sup>37</sup>: “My obstinate silences, this vague but all-pervasive suffering, the strange world that surrounded me, the nobility of my family, their poverty, my secrets—all this, I realised, *could be expressed!*”<sup>38</sup>. An important later Preface to

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 148-152.

<sup>35</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 136-137.

<sup>36</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 137.

<sup>37</sup>We note that, in his earliest pieces, notably Albert Camus, "Essay on Music," in *Youthful Writings*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), Camus sees in art a means to escape “the world in which we live with all its horrors”: a kind of romantic escapism. But he never returns to this idea, which indeed for him represents the kind of escapist temptation he will setting about rebelling against. (FC 131)

<sup>38</sup> Albert Camus, “Encounters with André Gide”, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 249. This sense of the artist as bearing witness to even the most abject explains why Camus

Chamfort will see Camus holding onto this almost phenomenological sense that "true artists do not scorn anything: they are obliged to comprehend in place of judging," clearly one key dimension of his sense of himself and his role as an artist.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, even at the level of this *témoignage*, Camus always challenged the coherence or validity of the idea of art being simply or wholly "realistic". To represent any particular subject involves a choice to represent just that, and nothing else, and to present it in a certain way: so we are dealing with selections and choices. And, as many other aestheticians have noted, re-presenting something in a canvas or poem, by changing its context, alters the ways we perceive it: "I believe I can assert that naturalism is only worthwhile by what it adds to life. Often it idolizes garbage. But this is then no longer just garbage ..."<sup>40</sup> The artist for Camus, even when she counts herself a realist, is not in the business of recreating reality. She must some way re-present it, by selecting particular aspects and images from the fabric of experience which s/he elevates to a different, symbolic or representative status.<sup>41</sup> By themselves, the important early essay "Art in Communion" explains, even the beauty of Mediterranean evenings (so dear to Camus) has but "a dreamy and sterile insignificance." Art's "more certain light" selects and represents aspects and elements of this unfolding, fleeing experience.<sup>42</sup> It is as if art in this way enacted a kind of "pause" –almost photographically, in a way which evokes similar ideas in Walter Benjamin<sup>43</sup> –capturing the

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would take with such warmth to the career of a journalist from 1938. Drawing on his own founding experiences of poverty, it will also inform his continuing sense that artistic creation is always on the side both of political liberty and, contra neoconservative readings of his work, of those humiliated by history's dominant powers.

<sup>39</sup> Camus cited at Monique Crochet, *Les Mythes dans L'Oeuvre d'Albert Camus* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1973), 224.

<sup>40</sup> Albert Camus, "Art in Communion," in *Youthful Writings*, 219.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Albert Camus, *L'Homme Révolté*, 320-321.

<sup>42</sup> Albert Camus, "Art in Communion", in *Youthful Writings*, 222.

<sup>43</sup> Albert Camus, "Art in Communion", 216, 223. A decade before Camus, Walter Benjamin had developed similar reflections about art in the age of mechanical reproduction (for instance, of images in photography) as devolving now towards "exhibition value", as against its more traditional "ritual value". Benjamin at times

fleeting sense of an experience: not by penetrating to “what lies beneath the delicate world of gesture and form,” but through the artist’s “giving oneself to it and communicating with it ...”<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to what we are given in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, however, there is both in Camus’s literary works of the 1940s in particular, and in his continuing reflections on aesthetics, a very different strand that holds onto art’s pedagogic or psychagogic role. For the Camus of this tendency, artists should not let go of the old Platonic idea that it is artists who “create the decisive myths for our conduct,” even if they are not as Shelley or Nietzsche suggested, the often unacknowledged legislators of the world.<sup>45</sup> He rails in “The Enigma” against the romantic idea that artists should be thought to write solely about themselves in these terms: “It is not wholly excluded, on the contrary, that an artist be interested at base in others, or in his times, or in [certain] familiar myths,” Camus protests in “The Enigma”.<sup>46</sup> Reflecting upon his own artistic creation in the first two cycles of his production, Camus thus can comment in the *Carnets* that he was “without doubt and until now ... not a novelist in the widely accepted sense. Above all [I am] an artist who creates myths to the measure of his passion and of his anguish ...”<sup>47</sup> It is not

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seems to hold out the hope that now art, shorn from the task of producing beautiful, auratic semblances, can begin to explore new means of play, as anticipated or glimpsed in the play of children; or else, as for instance in Walter Benjamin, “The Little History of Photography” *Selected Writings Volume II* translated by M. W. Jephcott and K. Shorter (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), that art can take on a new documentary power akin to what Camus also is attracted to in this component of his artistic self: *viz.* the capacity to capture the naked truth of things, not in their glorious appearances, but in their ignominious, usually passed over everydayness – what Benjamin called in a youthful essay of his own: “The elements of the ultimate condition [which] do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but ... deeply rooted in the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed ideas and products ...” (Walter Benjamin, “The Life of Students”, *Selected Writings Volume I* ed. Marcus Bullock, (USA: Belknap Press, 2004), p. 37.

<sup>44</sup> Albert Camus, “Art in Communion”, in *Youthful Writings*, 222.

<sup>45</sup> Albert Camus, “Create Dangerously,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, Death* trans. Justin O’Brien. (New York: Vintage, 1960), 259.

<sup>46</sup> Albert Camus, “The Enigma,” *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 158.

<sup>47</sup> Camus at Arthur Scherr, “Marie Cardona. An Ambivalent Nature-Symbol in Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger*” *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 66, no. 1 (Feb. 2011), 12.

for nothing that *The Myth of Sisyphus* bears the title it does and concludes with the famous section wherein Camus almost completely reframes this classical *mythos* in an affirmative way that horrified Blanchot, for one.<sup>48</sup> As Crochet (and more recently, Ronald Srigley) have shown, Camus's *oeuvre* is littered with classical and biblical motifs which Camus arrays before contemporary audiences, and through which he frames his thoughts and narratives: Sisyphus, Oedipus, Prometheus, Don Juan, Cain, Christ, Adam and the fall, Demeter and Persephone, Orpheus, Faust and Nemesis.<sup>49</sup>

The point, which will lead us back to our considerations concerning Camus's Meursault and Caligula, is that this second strand of Camus's creative persona implies a quite different, much more prescriptive selection of elements and characters from the flow of experience than the minimal "absurd creation" celebrated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Mythological characters and narratives, however they are interpreted, are generally recognised to have some symbolic as well as a literal signification. This symbolic signification, moreover, is held in some manner to put the *mythoi* into communication with the deepest, perhaps archetypal, concerns and dimensions of human experience: those with which philosophy also is concerned. There are thus myths of cosmological origins, myths concerning death and the afterlife, the nature and origins of the soul; as well as myths in which exemplary heroic or divine characters present modes of conduct which we are asked to admire, if not to emulate. Greek mythology was the world in which he felt "most at ease," Camus famously commented.<sup>50</sup> Crochet has shown, by looking at the *Carnets*, that Camus's interest in *mythopoiesis* as an artistic vocation emerges at a precise, decisive point in his career: 1937-1938. Indeed, Camus was clearly attracted, via Spengler who he was reading at this time, to the thought that mythical narratives unfold outside of the ordinary order of historical time: involving

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Jonathan Degenève, "« Quelle absence ! » : Blanchot lecteur de Camus," *Espace Maurice Blanchot*, at [www-site \[http://www-site.blanchot.fr/fr/index.php?option=com\\\_content&task=view&id=134&Itemid=41\]\(http://www-site.blanchot.fr/fr/index.php?option=com\_content&task=view&id=134&Itemid=41\)](http://www-site.blanchot.fr/fr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=134&Itemid=41), last accessed July 16 2014. Cf. Maurice Blanchot, "De Dostoïevski à Kafka", in *L'Ère du soupçon*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1956, coll. « Folio Essais », 1987), p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> Monique Crochet (1973), Srigley (2010), also Walker (1982).

<sup>50</sup> Albert Camus, *Carnets II Janvier 1942 – Mars 1951* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 214.

what he termed “a denial of time of the strongest intensity.”<sup>51</sup> What seems to be involved here is simply the sense that a characterisation or action has mythical force to the extent that it addresses issues eternally recurrent for human beings (generational or sexual difference, political relations, suffering or death ...) and does so by presenting possible responses to these fundamental issues, which new generations still must confront, take up or reject.<sup>52</sup> Mythical art for Camus, as we might say, is a living affront to the historicist view he assigns to Hegel (and which he sees as underlying the fascist and Stalinist ideologies) that human beings of any given time and culture are wholly the products of their historical times.<sup>53</sup>

It is characteristic of Camus – always a thinker of ambiguity or two-sidedness, *envers et endroit*<sup>54</sup> – that he tries to bring together these two (*témoignage* and myth-making) conceptions of artistic creation in his literary creation. Consider, for instance, the two sides of *The Plague*'s unusual formal profile. On the one hand, the book was criticised as a fairly transparent, almost mythical allegory of the Nazi occupation, and comment on the larger human condition.<sup>55</sup> Yet, allegories typically eschew any pretence to naturalism or realism. *The Plague*'s other formal side however is just such a presentation, as

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<sup>51</sup> Camus at Monique Crochet, *Les Mythes*, 49. Cf. Camus's laconic “*Absence du sens historique chez les Grecs* » in the *Carnets* at Albert Camus, *Carnets I Mai 1935 – Février 1942* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 100.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Crochet (1973), 44 on the decisive role of Spengler in shaping Camus's reception of classical mythology, and his notion that Greek mythology stages not the past, but timelessly recurrent patterns of the present: “in the same way that the history of Alexander the Great was confounded in antique sentiment with the legend of Dionysus even before his death ...” (Spengler at Crochet, *Les Mythes dans L'oeuvre d'Albert Camus*, 44).

<sup>53</sup> On Camus's opposition to historicism, cf. Albert Camus, *Albert Camus Oeuvres Complètes II 1944-1948* 741; 751; “Helen's Exile”, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 150-1; also *L'Homme Révolté*, “Les “La Prophétie bourgeoise””, 240-249.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. eg and esp. Albert Camus, *L'Homme Révolté*, 367-371; “Return to Tipasa”, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 162-171.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Camus at E. Freeman, *The Theatre of Albert Camus* (London: Methuen & Co., 1971), 84: “I want to express through the medium of the plague the suffocation from which we have all suffered and the atmosphere of menace and exile with which we have all lived. I want at the same time to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general. The plague will give the image of those in this war who have had the part of reflection, of silence – and that of moral suffering...”

a realistic chronicle compiled from the sober testimony of the medically trained observer, Doctor Rieux. The reason Camus gives for his profound admiration for Melville's *Moby Dick* in this light is highly significant, since it indicates the type of balance between descriptive testimony and myth-creation to which he aspired, and which this piece assigns to all great art. If Melville is great, says Camus, it is because, "like all great artists, constructed his symbols from the concrete, not in the material of dream ... inscribing them in the density [*épaisseur*] of reality and not in the fugitive clouds of the imagination."<sup>56</sup>

It is against this ideal of an art that balances objective descriptive sensitivity to the particularities of human experience, and the creation of mythical actions and characters that we think Camus's literary "absurd" should also be measured. Camus as an artist continued to experiment with trying to achieve this kind of balance between testimony and mythology, and we can see different manifestations of this, in their different genres, in *Caligula* and *The Stranger*. It is in this regard that Sartre's highly astute remarks on Meursault's mode of relating his "fate" in *L'Étranger* must be seen as giving us only one side of the story. In *The Stranger*, Sartre remarks:

[E]ach sentence is an instant ... the sentences are not, of course, arranged in relation to each other; they are simply juxtaposed. In particular, all causal links are avoided lest they introduce the germ of an explanation and an order other than that of pure succession ..."<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, Meursault's testimony reflects his own almost indifferently floating attention to the succession of different moments in time, just as Sartre describes: "each sentence is a present instant .... Sharp, distinct and self-contained. It is separated by a void from the following one ... the world is destroyed and reborn from sentence to sentence."<sup>58</sup> Yet there is another side to this sense of a breakdown of

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<sup>56</sup> Cited at Crochet *Le Mythes*, 215; in translation, at Albert Camus, "On Herman Melville", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 293. On Melville as creator of myths, cf. Albert Camus, "On Herman Melville", 289-293 inclusive.

<sup>57</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Camus' *The Outsider*", 39, cf. 36-39.

<sup>58</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Camus' *The Outsider*", 38.

linear, continuous time. The blank impersonal punctuality of Meursault's testimony, together with Camus's frequent scrambling of any sense of linear, unfolding time in the story, especially in the culminating beach scene, and Meursault's everywhere uncanny impassivity or indifference—all this, together with Sartre's absence of any proffered explanatory principle, nevertheless conspire in the mind of the reader to produce exactly something like the ancient sense of "hazard" or fate central to Greek mythology and tragedy.<sup>59</sup> It is after all exactly such a sense of fatality that Meursault famously avows after he has fired his four shots into the unmoving arab's body on the beach, and which again strikes him as he watches the prosecutor, judge and defence discuss his deeds as the trial unfolds, and realises "for the first time"—as unwitting almost as Oedipus—"that I was guilty."<sup>60</sup> Crochet has shown the extent to which *L'Étranger* can be seen to have drawn from, and adapted, mythological motifs from the biblical fall story, the scapegoating of Christ, and the tragedy of Oedipus.<sup>61</sup> The role of a mythical transformation of, this time an historical story, is even clearer in *Caligula*. Camus himself stated concerning *Caligula* that although he drew the historical episodes the play's action recounts after Caligula's confrontation with the death of his sister-lover Drusilla from Suetonius, the play's presentation of Caligula, and interpretation of his motives and significance, was nevertheless all Camus's own: "nothing here is unhistorical. The words are authentic, their exploitation is not."<sup>62</sup>

In this light, our point is, any assessment of what Meursault and *Caligula* are doing in Camus's *oeuvre*, relative to the wider movement of his developing thought, cannot rest with asserting the aesthetic

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<sup>59</sup> One feature of epics and mythical is the way that they recount episodes in succession (say, the cycle of labours of Hercules), but often suppress or simply leave unexplained narrative connections between these episodes, almost like what Freud describes as "secondary revision" in the dream-work.

<sup>60</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger* translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1946), 55.

<sup>61</sup> Monique Crochet, *Les Mythes dans L'Oeuvre d'Albert Camus*, 129-133, 139-146.

<sup>62</sup> At Luke Richardson, "Sisyphus and Caesar: the Opposition of Greece and Rome in Albert Camus' Absurd Cycle," *Classical Receptions Journal*, Volume 4, Issue 1 (2012), 72.

autonomy, or purely descriptive neutrality of these works of art. The mythopoetic dimension to Camus's "absurd creations" means we must look to situate their action in the terms of what Camus's philosophical thought tells us are the fundamental parameters of human experience responded to in myth—albeit a thought now explored in literature that:

... ceasing to be renunciatory, flowers in images. It frolics — in myths, to be sure, but myths with no other depth than that of human suffering and, like it, inexhaustible. Not the divine fable that amuses and blinds, but the terrestrial face, gesture, and drama in which are summed up a difficult wisdom and an ephemeral passion ...<sup>63</sup>

## 2. Meursault and Caligula "avec Sade"

While we should honour the defence of *L'Étranger's* relative autonomy from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* proposed by Lamb and others, that is, we cannot wholly accede to it. It goes too far or, as Camus might put it, it is excessive, when a balance is needed. To put our contention differently again: we should not throw out the philosophical baby with the literary bathwater, at the same time as we resist seeing the novel (or Camus's plays) as thesis-like "illustrations" of the "philosophy of the absurd" and its allegedly amoral ethics. *L'Étranger*, Camus could reflect in his *Carnets*, "describes the nudity of man in face of the absurd."<sup>64</sup> There is also surely a good deal of Camus, and of those Algerians marooned outside of history he describes in "Summer in Algiers," in this Meursault. In an interview, Camus would thus chide his European interlocutor that in some sense Europeans would always be at a disadvantage in understanding his laconic anti-hero.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, Solomon seems right to us when he claims that Meursault's cathartic

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<sup>63</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 158.

<sup>64</sup> Albert Camus, *Carnets II*, 36; Monique Crochet, *Les Mythes*, 133.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Albert Camus, "Summer in Algiers", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, esp. 86: "and you understand that he is born in a land where everything is given to be taken away. In such abundance and profusion, ... reflection or self-improvement are quite irrelevant."

*anagnorēsis* and refusal of the metaphysical “escape” proffered him by the Priest in the novel’s famous culminating action is unmistakably close to that “divine availability of the condemned man before whom the prison doors open in a certain early dawn” in whom Camus affirms, in his own name, “the only reasonable freedom” in *Le Mythe*.<sup>66</sup> The reader of Camus’s philosophical essay cannot be struck, when he turns to *Caligula*, that other of the “absurd”, by Caligula’s anguished embroilment with several of the celebrated themes Camus analyses in *Le Mythe*: notably the imperial freedom of the man who has Révoltéd against all consoling myths and the “divine equivalence” of all things seen outside of societies’ traditional evaluative categories.<sup>67</sup>

Whichever way we frame things, that is, Meursault and Caligula unmistakably embody different dramatic *responses* to “the absurd sensitivity which can be found widespread in the age,” to which *Le Mythe* also responded.<sup>68</sup> This is one reason, together with the power of Camus’s philosophical diagnosis of the dilemmas facing human beings living “beyond grace,” underlying the unmistakably mythical register and fasciation of both texts. As such, the responses of Meursault to the death of *maman* and Caligula’s traumatic acknowledgement that “people die, and are not happy”<sup>69</sup> are meant to have more than a particular, descriptive significance. Instead they are supposed to embody, like Ahab in *Moby Dick* or Alyosha, Dmitri and Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, something like mythical figures embodying permanently available “tendencies or temptations” that face us all, insofar as we are faced with the absurd. The trick is to understand which *kinds* of responses to the absurd they embody, and in particular to challenge the too-facile assumption that must for Camus represent ideals to emulate or follow.

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<sup>66</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 75, 87-88, 96-97. Caligula’s edifying theatrics are in part dedicated, he tells us, to making others understand truly what “freedom without frontier” (Albert Camus, “Caligula”, 45) could involve, as the one free man in Rome (“Caligula,” 48, 49).

<sup>68</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Albert Camus, “Caligula”, 40.

The question at this mythopoetic level is whether Meursault and Caligula, both of whom are (notably, given *The Rebel*) murderers represent “absurd heroes” or “saints of the absurd”, for Camus?<sup>70</sup> Our thesis, at this point, is a simple *no*. Our argument here is that both Meursault’s and Caligula’s careers in these works represent less the kinds of positions Camus himself wants to advocate on the basis of an acknowledgement of the absurd than forms of that kind of “suicide” *The Myth of Sisyphus* both comprehends but advocates against. Confronting the absurd divorce between our hopes and comprehension and reality, Camus after all insists, is only a beginning—and its mere confrontation in no way prevents, indeed it can encourage us, as soon as possible to flee the “absurd deserts” back in to one or other form of metaphysical consolation, or the thoughtless rounds of habit.<sup>71</sup>

In fact, as Heffernan has shown, Camus can be seen to have placed many cues to alert us to how the hero of *The Outsider*, at least until his final awakening, represents nothing like Camus’s ethical ideal or ideals, depicted in the second half of *Le Mythe* on the “absurd man”.<sup>72</sup> As we glimpsed above in *Le Mythe*’s comments on the artistic life, Camus’s ethical ideal is a kind of wakeful attentiveness to experience: if not the best living, then the most living: Meursault from beginning to near the end of *L’Étranger* is wracked by drowsiness, and periodic lapsings into sleep. When he is asked at trial concerning his motives, “I replied that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself”: far from that “constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert” that impresses Camus most.

Most of all, however, until the very end of *L’Étranger*, Meursault is presented by Camus as less someone who soberly weighs nature’s sovereign indifference to human purposes—embodied in the novel in the ever-present North African sun—while balancing this indifference against an appreciation of the human desire for unity

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<sup>70</sup> This result would presumably go a long way to compromising Camus’s philosophy, let alone his credentials as a moralist, whence its importance and recurrence.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Albert Camus, *Le Mythe*, 48-74 (“Le Suicide Philosophique”).

<sup>72</sup> I am indebted greatly to George Heffernan, “Mais personne ne parraissait comprendre”: Athiesm, Nihilism, and Hermeneutics in Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger*/*The Stranger Analecta Husserliana* CIX (2011), 133-152,

and sense *than someone who is in effect more and more violently overcome by nonhuman nature*. It is with light, above all, that Meursault has particular difficulties. In the novel's opening pages, it is "the glare of light" off the road and from the sky that makes Meursault want to sleep on the bus to *maman's* home.<sup>73</sup> The glare from the walls of the "bright, spotlessly keen" mortuary, and its white walls<sup>74</sup>, leads Meursault to ask his hosts if they cannot turn the lights down—in response to which, he is told that no, they are 'all or nothing'.<sup>75</sup> When *maman's* friends arrive, and Meursault is awoken:

I had a feeling that the light had grown even stronger than before .... Never in my life had I seen anyone as clearly as I say these people: not a detail of their clothes or features escaped me."<sup>76</sup>

At *maman's* funeral, again, the sky is described by Meursault as "a blaze of light," or a furnace with "the air stoking up rapidly ..."<sup>77</sup> so as to threaten to obliterate all possibility of human inhabitancy: "now, in the full glare of the morning sun, with everything shimmering in the heat haze, there was something inhuman, discouraging, about this landscape."<sup>78</sup> Things famously culminate, however, in the dreadful moment of the murder. Camus's narration makes it clear that, at this fateful moment, Meursault is veritably assaulted by "the same sun as at *maman's* funeral"; blinded to all human significance in the murderous epiphany of the sun:

A shaft of light shot upward from the steel, and I felt as if a long, thin blade transfixed my forehead. At the same

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<sup>73</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 6, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Albert Camus, *Stranger*, 7. This is a significant phrase for Camus, especially in *The Rebel*, where it comes to delineate the kinds of excessive, finally murder-vindicating thinking he associates with totality and revolution, in contrast to unity and rebellion.

<sup>76</sup> Albert Camus, *Stranger*, 8.

<sup>77</sup> Albert Camus, *Stranger*, 11. We note that the sand under their feet stokes up on the day of the murder (*Stranger* 33), it was hot like a furnace on the beach (*Stranger* 36), and that the sky is starting to "stoke up" again at exactly the time of day when Meursault's trial properly begins, at *Stranger*, 54.

<sup>78</sup> Albert Camus, *Stranger*, 11.

moment all the sweat that had accumulated in my eyebrows splashed down on my eyelids, covering them with a warm film of moisture. Beneath a veil of brine and tears my eyes were blinded; I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and, less distinctly, of the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs. Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. And so, with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began ...<sup>79</sup>

Meursault, until at least his closing catharsis, thus represents anything but a Camusian ideal attesting to kind of lucid, wakeful confrontation between human desire and the inhumanity of the world the author of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* celebrates. He is in fact, until his final cathartic confrontation with the Priest, someone increasingly passively overwhelmed by this inhumanity, until he becomes almost its murderous avatar. It is because of the sun that he killed, so he testifies, but no one listens.<sup>80</sup> "Suicide" may not be right word here: since it implies a sense of volition that Meursault vividly attests to having lost, and after the shooting he is more or less constrained by the state, watching on with curious fascination as the state tries and decides to kill him. Thinking forward to Camus's typology of responses to the existence of senseless suffering in *The Rebel*, we want now to suggest, this fatal blindness comes closest to anticipating the kind of "absolute negation" Camus ascribes to the romantics and the Marquis de Sade.

To make this claim, we need therefore to briefly recall how Camus delineates these kinds of "figures of spirit" in *L'Homme Révolté*, whose representatives (like Meursault in *L'Étranger*) end up

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<sup>79</sup> Albert Camus, *Stranger* 38-39.

<sup>80</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, 64: "I tried to explain that it was because of the sun, but I spoke too quickly and ran my words into each other. I was only too conscious that it sounded nonsensical, and, in fact, I heard people tittering ..."

with blood on their hands. For Camus, what marks off these figures' "metaphysical rebellion" against the idea of a providential, salvific God is their sense that the reality of evil represents proof positive that God's order is inhumane. While Camus's rebel also accepts this modern notion, what singles out Sade and the romantics is that they "leap" from acknowledging the reality of such divinely or naturally-ratified evil, to citing this evil as justification for their own literary celebrations of transgression against this order as ends in themselves. "In order to combat evil, the rebel renounces good, because he considers himself innocent, and once again gives birth to evil,"<sup>81</sup> Camus argues concerning these figures: from Milton, then Vigny and Lermontov's sympathy with the devil, through to Lermontov's Maldador, whose copulations with a shark and attack on the Creator Himself in the form of an octopus are "are clear expressions of an escape beyond the frontiers of existence and of a convulsive attack on the laws of nature."<sup>82</sup>

The Prince amongst these "men of letters", however, is Sade. Sade does not propose attacking the unjust Deity: far from it. As Jacques Lacan discerned a little after Camus (with common reference to Klossowski's *Sade, mon prochain*)<sup>83</sup>, having surmised that God must have willed senseless human suffering, Sade instead sides with this evil big Other, as the only effectively pious thing to do.<sup>84</sup> The fortresses of crime he thus established have more of the convent about them than only their segregation from the profane world wherein men give way, without rhyme or reason, on their untethered desires. Sade's for instance stipulates that all the *jouisseurs* should

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<sup>81</sup> Camus, *L'Homme Révolté*, 71.

<sup>82</sup> Camus, *L'Homme Révolté*, 114.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Camus, *L'Homme Révolté*, 61.

<sup>84</sup> Compare Jacques Lacan, "Kant With Sade": "Sade ... stopped at the point where desire and the law became bound up with each other [*se noue*]. / If something in him lets itself remain tied to the law in order to take the opportunity, mentioned by Saint Paul, to become inordinately sinful, who would cast the first stone? But Sade went no further. / It is not simply that the flesh is weak, as it is for each of us; it is that the spirit is not willing not to be deluded. [Sade's] apology for crime merely impels him to an oblique acceptance of the Law. The Supreme Being [as for instance the Nature of Pius VI] is restored in Evil Action [*le Maléfice*]," at 667 [Fr. 790].

periodically confess concerning the exactions and infamies.<sup>85</sup> These “strongholds of debauchery where a kind of bureaucracy of vice rules over the life and death”<sup>86</sup> are engaged in the business of doing God’s work, or the work of Nature, carrying out the violent edicts of the inhuman natural order: “a lawless universe where the only master is the inordinate energy of desire.”<sup>87</sup> To be true to this libidinal order, we are called upon to give up on all our merely whimsical pleasures—in an ironic or demonic doubling of Kant’s purely deontological ethics, as Lacan, Adorno and Horkheimer<sup>88</sup> each maintained:

It is a curious kind of pleasure, no doubt, which obeys the commandment: ‘We shall rise every morning at ten o’clock’! But enjoyment must be prevented from degenerating into attachment, it must be put in parentheses and toughened. Objects of enjoyment must also never be allowed to appear as persons. If man is ‘an absolutely material species of plant,’ he can only be treated as an object and as an object for experiment. In Sade’s fortress republic, there are only machines and mechanics.<sup>89</sup>

In Camus’s *Caligula*, the proximity between Camus’s absurd anti-hero and this Sadean position is more direct than in the ambivalent case of Meursault. Like Sade, with whose clear-sighted apprehension that “murder is an attribute of the divinity” Camus agrees<sup>90</sup>, Caligula’s eyes are opened by Drusilla’s death to the reality “that nothing lasts,”<sup>91</sup> including human lives, despite the fact that ordinary social conventions seem to conspire to conceal or avoid acknowledging this larger reality of our condition. Thus is explained the emperor’s “devastating scorn”<sup>92</sup> for all social convention, and the

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<sup>85</sup> Camus, *L’Homme Révolté*, 65.

<sup>86</sup> Camus, *L’Homme Révolté*, 64.

<sup>87</sup> Camus, *L’Homme Révolté*, 60.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer, “Excursus II: Juliette, or the Enlightenment and Morals”.

<sup>89</sup> Camus, *L’Homme Révolté*, 65.

<sup>90</sup> Camus, *L’Homme Révolté*, 59.

<sup>91</sup> Camus, “Caligula”, 102, cf. 101.

<sup>92</sup> Camus, “Caligula,” 69, 102.

desires of others for wealth, status, power, love, recognition, or comfort. He declaims, as Meursault still does at the end, “everything’s on an equal footing”<sup>93</sup>, “the world has no importance ...”<sup>94</sup>; “it all comes to the same in the end.”<sup>95</sup> But, like the romantics, here again Caligula’s rebellion against this unhappy fate flips almost immediately to the perverse, “logical” conclusion that the only thing left to do, condemned as we are to this order, is to consciously *oneself* take on the violences of which we are otherwise merely the passive victims. Hence, far from rejecting the irrationality and inhumanity of the world that provokes his rebellion, Caligula ‘sides with’ this irrationality, no less than Camus depicts Shestov or Kierkegaard doing in the realm of ideas. It is just that Caligula then—here more like a kind of murderous dandy, and as good as his words—sets about making an example of himself: using his absolute power as a kind of pedagogical theatre<sup>96</sup> or classroom to open the eyes of his contemporaries to their fate. By the same murderous token, Caligula tells us, “to prove to the imaginary gods that any man, without prior training, can play their absurd role to perfection ... all that’s needed is to be as cruel as they.”<sup>97</sup> Caligula, as he says, “plays the part of Fate”<sup>98</sup> and natural or divine evil, just as Sade had dreamed for his libertines: “it’s I who replace the epidemics ...”<sup>99</sup>

And the result, once more, is not a life well lived, lucid before the absurd and faithful to each of its competing demands. It is a murderous career that culminates in Caligula salving his immovable sense of guilt by consenting to his own death at the hands of Cherea and his bands of partisans.<sup>100</sup> To paraphrase Camus’s summation of Kierkegaard’s and Shestov’s “existential philosophies”: in Meursault standing on the beach with a gun in his hand, and Caligula

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<sup>93</sup> Camus, “Caligula,” 43-44.

<sup>94</sup> Camus, “Caligula,” 46. Cf. Camus, *Stranger*, 74.

<sup>95</sup> Camus, “Caligula,” 64.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Camus, “Caligula,” 49.

<sup>97</sup> Camus, “Caligula,” 74-75.

<sup>98</sup> Camus, “Caligula,” 92.

<sup>99</sup> Camus, “Caligula,” 92, cf. 75.

<sup>100</sup> Camus, “Caligula,” 104, cf. 78-85 where Caligula’s suicidal desire to be killed by the resisters is made clear.

declaiming on the need for a Great Transformation, we see that “all without exception suggest escape.”<sup>101</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

The argumentative work in this paper is now done. We have tried to steer a middle course between the position represented pre-eminently by Sartre, according to which Camus's early fiction “illustrate” the absurd, and the position of figures like Lamb who want to deny any link between Camus's philosophical reflection in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the two literary “absurds.”<sup>102</sup> Returning to Camus's ongoing reflections on aesthetics and his own artistic practices, we argued that there is an entire, important dimension of Camus's artistic persona—as a creator of myths aimed to speak to contemporary men and women, and the difficulties we face living after the contestation of the West's “sacred canopy”—whose existence prompts us to posit *some* relation between the philosophical discourses and the characters and actions staged in Camus's fictions. The golden thread we followed comes in Camus's important remark concerning Roger Martin du Gard, that artists' characters may not directly represent themselves so much as “tendencies and temptations” s/he has herself experienced. *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* both document that confronting the absurd (in *Le Mythe*) or the reality of natural and human evil (in *L'Homme Révolté*) involve temptations to “leap” into one or other form of “all or nothing” position—positing that all *must* be rational, despite contrary evidence; or that the evident *irrationality* of the world is itself the True and Final word. In this light, it becomes possible (and arguably closest to Camus's own intentions) to maintain both that the literary “absurds” are not “completely independent” of the philosophical discourse of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, while denying that either Meursault nor Caligula in Camus's early, ground-breaking fiction represent exemplary ethical responses to the disjunction between human hopes and what the world provides. Each encounters the absurd, and aspects of their characters and actions—the observant, present-

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<sup>101</sup> Camus, *Le Mythe*, 52.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Albert Camus, *Carnets I Mai 1935-Février 1942*, 224.

minded lucidity in Meursault, and Caligula's distance from conventional values and concerns—resonate with aspects of Camus's ethics in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. Yet Camus is always clear that fidelity to the absurd requires a lucid openness to all aspects of experience as they present themselves, and the ethical imperative to preserve the conscious human lives (one's own in *L Mythe*, and those of others, in *The Rebel*) that can maintain this awareness. Yet both *The Stranger* and *Caligula* document the stories of murderers: in Meursault's case, that of an almost unwitting killer, overwhelmed by the intrusive heat and light of the North African sun; but in Caligula's case, with the same kind of philosophical self-awareness that characterises Sade's dilettantes, whom Caligula's theatrical actions and monologues sometimes call to mind. In the light of the philosophical perspective Camus develops from *Le Mythe* into *The Rebel*, each of these figures embodies a form of absolute negation or irrationalism: as it were, passively or actively "siding with" the inhuman dimensions of the world, whose plagues, natural disasters and encroaching transience challenge humans' best efforts to create unity and meaning from their condition. Although we do not have the space to explore this here, it should also be underlined that neither anti-hero exhausts the range of options of responding to the absurd that each text stages. Camus tells us that he always remained most fond of Marie and Céleste of all his characters in *L'Étranger*<sup>103</sup>, and there are moments of sympathy in the text also for Salamano and his dog<sup>104</sup>; whereas Caligula's madness is soon discerned, and then overcome, by Cherea, whose resistance to Caligula's tyranny, moved by the desire "to regain peace of mind in a world that has regained a meaning" or "... to live, and to be happy" much more closely approach what we know Camus's own biographical course to have been.<sup>105</sup> Meursault and Caligula, that is, are to be read "with Sade," to evoke once more Jacques Lacan's famously provocative title aligning the Marquis with Immanuel Kant. Their tales are not "absurd heroes" but mythopoetic, literary

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<sup>103</sup> Albert Camus, "Three Interviews," *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 361.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Ingrid Fernandez, "Of Dogs and Men: Empathy and Emotion in Camus' *The Stranger*" *Journal of Camus Studies* (2012), 53-56.

<sup>105</sup> Albert Camus, "Caligula," 54-82.

explorations of the all-too-human ways that, unable to bear the absurd and its exigencies, human beings seek to elude or escape their finitude, much too often by visiting this finitude upon others.