



DR ADEK

Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics  
and New Media Theories

Vol. I Num. 2 2015

ISSN 2465-1060  
[online]

## The QUARREL between POETRY and PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Alessandra Aloisi and Danilo Manca

powered by



RESEARCH GROUP

<http://zetesisproject.com/>

Scientific Board:

Prof. Leonardo Amoroso (Università di Pisa), Prof. Christian Benne (University of Copenhagen), Prof. Andrew Benjamin (Monash University, Melbourne), Prof. Fabio Camilletti (Warwick University), Prof. Luca Crescenzi (Università di Pisa), Prof. Paul Crowther (NUI Galway), Prof. William Marx (Université Paris Ouest Nanterre), Prof. Alexander Nehamas (Princeton University), Prof. Antonio Prete (Università di Siena), Prof. David Roochnik (Boston University), Prof. Antonietta Sanna (Università di Pisa), Prof. Claus Zittel (Stuttgart Universität)

Executive Board

Matteo Bensi, Danilo Manca (coordinator), Lorenzo Serini, Valentina Serio, Marta Vero

Review Board:

Alessandra Aloisi, Ester Fuoco, Annamaria Lossi, Nikos Loukidelis, Cathrin Nielsen, Francesco Rossi

ODRADEK. Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics and New Media Theories.  
ISSN 2465-1060 [online]

Edited by Associazione “Zetesis-Progetto di studi e Dialoghi Filosofici”,  
via Paoli, 15 - 56126 Pisa. Registered by Agenzia delle Entrate di Pisa, n. 3705, serie III,  
23.10.2014



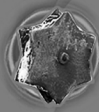
License Creative Commons

Odradek. Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics and New Media Theories  
di Zetesis is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution, non-commercial 4.0  
International.

Further authorization out of this license terms may be available at <http://zetesisproject.com> or writing to: [zetesis@unipi.it](mailto:zetesis@unipi.it).

Layout editor: Stella Ammaturo

Volume Editors: Alessandra Aloisi, Danilo Manca



DR ADEK

Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics  
and New Media Theories

Vol. I Num. 2 2015

ISSN 2465-1060  
[online]

## The QUARREL between POETRY and PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Alessandra Aloisi and Danilo Manca

powered by



RESEARCH GROUP

<http://zetesisproject.com/>



*From Rhetoric to Reflection:  
Albert Camus and the «Ancient Quarrel»*

Grace Whistler

Abstract

*In this paper I argue that Camus' entire œuvre can be seen as a struggle to reconcile «the quarrel» between philosophy and literature, which originates from Plato's proscription of poetry from the polis in The Republic. With a view to demonstrating what I believe to be Camus' own vision of the role of literature in regard to philosophy, I examine Camus' personal struggles with the written word. I suggest that Camus' stance in the quarrel is informed by his engagement with different modes of writing, arguing that for Camus, what cannot be effectively communicated via certain linguistic conventions is a comprehension of the subjective experiences of others. I demonstrate his attempt to address this deficit and promote philosophical reflection in the reader, via an examination of the rhetorical devices and techniques he employs in his literary works. I conclude that Camus' endeavour to provoke philosophical reflection through literary form is in many ways a successful one which should, in terms of «the quarrel», guarantee a place for poetry in the polis.*

## 1. Introduction: The Quarrel

The «ancient quarrel» between philosophy and literature originates from Plato's *The Republic*, in which poetry is proscribed from the *polis*.<sup>1</sup> This mistrust of literary and aesthetic language has been immensely influential throughout the history of philosophy. Let us take, for example, the following famous passage of Locke's *Essay*:

[L]anguage 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

---

1 Plato, (2007). *The Republic*. Translated by D. Lee. London, Penguin, Book X.

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<sup>2</sup>.

Locke defines the basis for the quarrel clearly: rhetoric can be alluring and misleading, making it too dangerous a tool to be applied to philosophical problems. This is just one of many attempts at settling this quarrel, and indeed one writer whose œuvre reveals quite a different attempt to reconcile the relationship between philosophy and literature is Albert Camus. For Camus, logic and reason are the deceptive tools which can be twisted to satisfy the purposes of the user, not rhetoric.

He tells us that «philosophy [...] can be used for anything, even transferring murderers into judges»<sup>3</sup>. Nobel Prize-winning author, philosopher, existentialist, journalist, political essayist, and playwright – the scope of his writing makes him somewhat difficult to categorise, but we can see already that Camus has something to offer to the quarrel.

With a view to demonstrating what I believe to be Camus' own vision of the role of literature in regard to philosophy (that certain kinds of philosophical understanding are best achieved through encounters

---

<sup>2</sup> Locke, J. (1975) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford Clarendon, III. X. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Camus, A. (1971). *The Rebel*. Translated by H. Hamilton, 1953, London Penguin, p. 11.

with fiction), this essay will explore Camus' personal struggles with the written word.

I will begin by looking at the role that the comprehension of the Other plays in Camus' philosophy, making particular reference to his concept of «rebellion» but offering some indication of how this relates to his stance in the quarrel.

I then go on to suggest that Camus' approach is informed by his engagement with different modes of writing, arguing that his experiences as a journalist motivate his suspicion of linguistic convention (be that the truth claims of philosophical arguments or the clichés of headlines) – a feeling which is at the heart of both his philosophical and literary texts.

I will come to suggest that, for Camus, the conventional language of journalistic reports and philosophical arguments fail to achieve something important: a comprehension of the subjective experiences of others, which is an important tool for provoking philosophical reflection. I will then examine his attempt to address this deficit via an examination of the rhetorical devices and techniques he employs in his literary works (such as narrative personae and nomenclature).

I conclude that Camus' endeavour to provoke philosophical reflection through literary form is in many ways a successful one which should, in terms of «the quarrel», guarantee a place for poetry in the *polis*.



## 2. Approach and Genre

Camus' philosophy is a philosophy of «la compréhension»<sup>4</sup>, founded on a central belief that to live a meaningful life, we must endeavour to comprehend the lives, misfortunes and motives of others. This is perhaps most fully developed in his extended philosophical essay *The Rebel*, in which he expounds the concept of rebellion («la révolte») as a metaphysical basis for social responsibility. To summarise briefly, Camus suggests that the act of rebellion is a defence of human rights in general, not just the individual rights of the rebel.

As Camus puts it, «when he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and, from his point of view, human solidarity is metaphysical»<sup>5</sup>. In other words, in protesting the infringement of his own rights (the transgression of his own limits), the rebel begins to discern the needs of the other; and thus, morality is derived from comprehension. This new comprehension of the other has a profound effect that works in both directions.

The rebel «must respect the limits that it discovers in itself – limits where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist»<sup>6</sup>. The rebel's understanding

---

4 Much like Tarrou's code of morality in *La Peste* (2008, *Œuvres complètes*. Vol 2. Edited by J. Lévi-Valensi *et al.* Paris: Gallimard, p. 123.

5 Camus, *The Rebel*, pp. 22-23.

6 *Ivi*, p. 27.

returns to the self, via the other, on its way gaining new moral agency. Whilst being the perhaps the most developed account of Camus' ethics, *The Rebel* has a political aim, and it is therefore limited in its applicability to the current essay.

The ideas discussed in the work were being developed long before the publication of this essay, however, and as we shall see, (given the narrow scope of *The Rebel*) his earlier works often provide broader insights into Camus' philosophical inclinations. Indeed, through an examination of his oeuvre in general, we are able to approach the main focus of this essay: Camus' exploration of the relation between philosophical ideas and their written representation.

In his early days as a writer, Camus gravitated toward journalism in the hope of encouraging the kind of broadening of horizons he would later focus on in *The Rebel*.

He wrote for and edited several newspapers throughout his life (specifically the *Alger Républicain*, *Paris Soir*, and *Combat*)<sup>7</sup>, 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<sup>8</sup>. Thus,

---

7 See Todd, O. (1996) *Albert Camus: Une Vie*. Paris, Gallimard.

8 Parker, E. (1966) *Albert Camus: Artist in the Arena*, Madison, Wisconsin University Press, p. 21.

Camus discovered first-hand the difficulties entailed in any attempt to communicate the experiences of others. In encountering the barriers of propaganda, and no less, the restrictive, clichéd language of the media, he was unconvinced of the ability of news print to convey authentic messages.

This dissatisfaction is illustrated from the perspective of Dr Rieux in *The Plague*, in whom Camus is «present, barely disguised» according to his leading biographer, Olivier Todd<sup>9</sup>:

[E]very 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<sup>10</sup>.

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

---

9 Todd, *Une Vie*, p.330 (translated by B. Ivry in Todd, O. (1998) *Albert Camus: A Life*. London, Vintage, p. 133).

10 Camus, A. (1947) *The Plague*. Translated by R. Buss, 2001. London, Penguin, pp. 105-106).

which is the theoretical foundation of journalism, «the most authentic sufferings [are] habitually translated into the banal clichés of conversation»<sup>11</sup>.

As Camus once wrote in *Combat*, «[i]t may take a hundred issues of a newspaper to express a single idea»<sup>12</sup>. 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 Camus had difficulty settling on.

Indeed, Camus often approached philosophical problems from multiple angles. In the first cycle of Camus' writing (what might be referred to as his «absurd» works – *The Outsider*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Caligula*), Camus envisaged «several parts with each section embodies with different techniques, and their results illustrate the consequences of an absurd grappling with life»<sup>13</sup>.

During this period he was working on the idea that «[c]ertain works can illustrate one another»<sup>14</sup>, approaching the problem of the absurd via multiple media. The themes he addresses in *The Myth* echo those that readers of *The Outsider* come to contemplate via different means:

---

11 Camus, *The Plague*, p. 60.

12 Camus, A. (1991). *Between Hell and Reason: Essays from the Resistance Newspaper Combat, 1944-1947*.

13 Letter to his friend Claude de Fréminville, undated (translated by B. Ivry in Todd, *A Life*, p. 105).

14 Letter to André Malraux, 15th November 1941 (translated by B. Ivry in Todd, *A Life*, p. 134).

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<sup>15</sup>.

This contemplation of the absurd, mortality and the death penalty permeates these works – and as intended, both literary and philosophical texts manage to bring about reflection on the same philosophical problems.

Camus is perhaps best known for his novels, the most famous of which is *The Outsider*, in many ways a standard text for communicating the problem of the absurd. Though the novel was his first to be published, it was by no means the first he began.

The first novel that Camus completed was *A Happy Death*, 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]»<sup>16</sup>. Thankfully it was deemed of enough interest to be published posthumously,

---

<sup>15</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, p. 536.

<sup>16</sup> As Camus wrote in a letter to Marguerite Dobrenn dated 17<sup>th</sup> August 1937 (translated by B. Ivry in Todd, *A Life*, p. 65).

because it provides an important insight into the formulation and development of Camus' later works, however «clumsy and stiff»<sup>17</sup> its style is.

For instance, the name «Meursault» which appears later in *The Outsider*, is found here in the form of «Mersault». He also experimented with elements of fictionalised biography that he would not return to until his final novel, also unpublished (though this time because it remained unfinished at the time of his death). In *A Happy Death*, just as in *The First Man*, the protagonist grew up in the slums of Belcourt and lost a father in the Battle of Marne.

Whilst this work provides valuable clues to how his later works came into being, *A Happy Death* is itself a reincarnation of another unfinished novel by Camus, titled variously «*Le Quartier pauvre*» (The Poor Quarter), «*L'Hôpital du quartier pauvre*» (The Hospital of the Poor Quarter) and «*Les Voix du quartier pauvre*» (The Voices of the Poor Quarter). Camus abandoned this novel after reworking it for two years (1936-1938), and although he reused elements of this work in later novels, *Le Quartier pauvre* remained in draft form and never reached the printing press<sup>18</sup>.

Camus' earliest philosophical work is *The Myth of Sisyphus*<sup>19</sup>, which attempts to address the problems

---

17 As he wrote in a letter to Jeanne Sicard on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1937 (translated by B. Ivry in Todd, *A Life*, p. 72).

18 Todd, *Une Vie*, p. 31.

19 Camus, A. (1942) *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by J. O'Brien, in *The Plague*,

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<sup>20</sup>.

By this time, Camus had already been working on his essay for two years<sup>21</sup>, so it is not entirely surprising that even the finished piece shows signs of his difficulty with integrating ideas and creativity; we are, however, given some further clues to his stance in the quarrel.

Whilst widely considered one of the only two philosophical works he ever produced, *The Myth* is heavily reliant on allegory and storytelling. *The*

---

*The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom*. 1955, London, Everyman's Library.

20 Letter to Francine, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1939 (translated by B. Ivry in Todd, *A Life*, p. 92).

21 Todd, *Une Vie*, p. 221.

*Myth* 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. In making such a manoeuvre, Camus demonstrates the importance he bestows upon literature in regard to philosophy, but he makes it even clearer in telling us that:

[t]he 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<sup>22</sup>.

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

---

<sup>22</sup> Camus, *The Myth*, p. 573–574.



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»<sup>23</sup>. But if both philosophy and the novel are creative works, what is the essential difference between the texts of novelists such as these and philosophical texts? And why is it that Camus chiefly endeavoured to communicate his thought through fiction? 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<sup>24</sup>.

This «educative message of perceptible appearance» is the kind of philosophical growth that

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*, p. 574.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

Camus believes a novel can offer. The «unexpressed philosophy» of a novel are the ideas that (without necessarily being conscious of it) we are brought to reflect upon by the novel.

For Camus, philosophical texts rely too wholly on «principle[s] of explanation» which «estrangle» us from life – such explanations are not conducive to the type of philosophical reflection Camus wants to achieve, a comprehension which «reconciles to life».

A more recent philosopher tackling the same problem is Martha Nussbaum, who suggests that an important distinction between the activity of engaging with philosophy and the activity of engaging with literature lies in our approach as readers:

[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 undisputed<sup>25</sup>.

I suggest that Nussbaum's stance in the quarrel is much like Camus'. Just like her, he displays a

---

<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum, 1992. p. 282.

dissatisfaction with regard to philosophical language and thought. Certainly, Camus uses fiction as a philosophical vehicle, but even in his explicitly philosophical essays, Camus relies on metaphor and imagery to illustrate his arguments.

Phrases such as «under a cruel sky»<sup>26</sup>, or «with knives in our hand and lumps in our throats»<sup>27</sup> 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' creative works also comment on the conflict between the human condition and rational language. A particularly crisp example of this is found in the words of his fellow journalist, Rambert, in *The Plague*, 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 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

---

<sup>26</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p. 15.

more likely to forgive his impulsive selfishness. We too «want [...] with all [...] strength for Rambert to be back with his woman and for all those who loved one another to be reunited»<sup>28</sup>.

Camus is both commenting on philosophical form and encouraging philosophical reflection. According *The Republic*, our experience of reality is divorced from the *objective* truth, but precisely because art is «something a third remove from the truth»<sup>29</sup>, it has the ability to communicate subjective realities other than our own, and it is therefore all the better for bringing about comprehension and empathy: a priority for Camus, despite the warning that Plato gives against such responses.

We are told in *The Fall* that «[t]ruth, like light, blinds. False-hood, on the contrary, is like a beautiful twilight that enhances every object»<sup>30</sup>.

This beautiful twilight is the space in which our non-judgmental pre-reflection is most receptive to philosophical counsel, where we are most open to sharing the author's positing of a subjective reality and comprehending the other.

---

28 Camus, *The Plague*, p. 68.

29 Plato, *The Republic*, p. 345.

30 Camus, A. (1956) *The Fall*. Translated by J. O'Brien, 1957. London, Penguin.

### 3. Narrative and Distance

The claim that Camus' novels are philosophical is a fairly uncontroversial one. His novels focus on and allude to a number of philosophical themes: not only the absurd, but also notions of guilt, innocence, suffering, compassion, mortality, freedom, and so on.

What is of most interest to this paper, however, is how Camus uses the novel to encourage reflection on philosophical ideas. Camus attempts to achieve a comprehension of the subjective realities of others via narrative means – through encounters with the perspectives he creates, the reader is brought to reflect on philosophical issues.

Examples of these attempts are too numerous to examine comprehensively, but it will be fruitful to look at several in order to give some depth to our understanding of his engagement with the quarrel. The following passage from *The Plague* (depicting a young boy in agony on his death bed) is certainly an effective one:

[T]he child was struggling with all his strength. From time to time Rieux would take his pulse (unnecessarily and rather to escape from the state of powerless inactivity in which he found himself); and when he closed his eyes he could feel this agitation mingled with the throbbing in his own veins. At such times he felt himself merge with the martyred child and tried

to sustain him with all his still undiminished strength. But the beating of their two hearts, united for a minute, would cease to harmonize; the child escaped him and his efforts dissolved into nothingness. At this, he would put down the slender wrist and go back to his place<sup>31</sup>.

Camus chooses the image of the suffering of an innocent child to illustrate the injustice and absurdity of life. The use of the word «martyred» to describe the child leads us to reflect on the notion of a meaningful death, and in the godless world of *The Plague*, we are made aware of just how needless and unjustifiable this child's suffering really is. Rieux's empathy for the child results in a disruption of the self/Other distinction, and phenomenon of Rieux's pain in witnessing this suffering merges with that of the child's pain.

Their beating hearts are «united» against the futility of the human condition, and Rieux is overcome with the absurd idea that he might be able to «sustain» the life of the child. Also in *The Plague*, in Tarrou's account of witnessing a trial in which the accused faced the death penalty, questions of innocence and guilt arise, also human frailty, mortality and justice:

I have kept only one image of that day, which is that of the guilty man. I really do believe he

---

<sup>31</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, p. 167.

was guilty, though it doesn't matter of what. But this little man with his meagre red hair, some thirty years of age, seemed so determined to admit to everything, so sincerely terrified by what he had done and what they were going to do to him, that after a few minutes I had eyes only for him. He looked like an owl stricken with fear by an over-bright light. The knot of his tie was not precisely in the centre of his collar. He was chewing the nails of just one hand, the right... Well, I need say no more — you understand, he was alive<sup>32</sup>.

The vulnerability of the accused in the face of death is made poignant by the intimate detail of his physical appearance – these bitten nails, wonky tie and thinning hair belong to a man, not an idea.

His willingness to admit to his crime, and his fear of «what he had done» make the reader question whether punishment is really necessary for repentance.

Similarly, in *The Outsider*<sup>33</sup>, Camus' use of a first-person narrator makes our experience of Meursault's unfortunate story more acute, personal and poignant. Being privy to his own account of events, we know that Meursault is sentenced to death not for his crime of murder, but for his unwillingness to feign remorse to a morally unreflective courtroom and

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 191.

<sup>33</sup> Camus, A. (1942). *The Outsider*. Translated by J. Laredo, 1982. London, Penguin.

for «burying his mother like a heartless criminal»<sup>34</sup>. Meursault's real crime is a lack of decorum and his inability to engage in the moral role-play of society; he is unwilling to tell a lie in court at the advice of his lawyer, simply «because it's not true»<sup>35</sup>.

As readers, we are in direct communion with this flawed yet honest human, and are therefore more able to understand that his beginning a physical relationship with Marie the day after his mother's death was not «indulg[ing] in the most shameful debauchery»<sup>36</sup>.

Rather, for Meursault, the two events were decontextualised by his longstanding desire for Marie<sup>37</sup>: his «physical needs often distorted his feelings»<sup>38</sup>. Similarly, Meursault did not «kill [...] a man in order to resolve an intrigue on unconscionable immorality»<sup>39</sup>, he lost control in a moment of delirious heat and killed a man who was a danger to his friend. Camus' literary technique allows us to transcend hasty ethical judgments and look into Meursault's subjective reality, we are open-minded before «an evaluative point of view we have good reason to resist»<sup>40</sup>.

---

34 *Ivi*, p. 93.

35 *Ivi*, p. 65.

36 *Ivi*, p. 92.

37 We are told that Marie «used to be a typist at the office. I'd fancied her at the time, and I think she'd fancied me too. (*Ivi*, p.29).

38 *Ivi*, p.65.

39 *Ivi*, p.92.

40 Denham, A. (2014). 'Representing Ethical Estrangement', paper presented at *Art and Morality*, Budapest, 4-5th June.



In order to communicate the subjective experiences which no doubt inform his philosophical approach, Camus also experimented with fictionalised autobiography. Throughout his works, many connections can be made to the life of Camus, but most particularly in his final novel, *The First Man*<sup>41</sup>

This text was only published posthumously by his daughter as the manuscript for it was unfinished at the time of his death. Catherine Camus described the book as «his most nakedly autobiographical novel»<sup>42</sup>, and indeed it echoes many aspects of his life, such as the death of a father he never knew at the Battle of Marne during the First World War, his childhood in the slums of Belcourt, Algiers and the scholarship that enabled him to embark on an academic career<sup>43</sup>.

What comes across most vividly to the reader, however, is the effects that experiences such as those of the protagonist Jacques Cormery (or indeed Camus) has on the world view and moral life of an individual.

Cormery and Camus do feel as though their agnosticism and lost heritage are avoid in their lives, they are instead freed of the bias that a strong sense of identity sometimes entails; they are «with no past,

---

41 Camus, A. (1994.) *The First Man*. Translated by D. Hapgood, 1995. London, Penguin.

42 Camus, C. (1994.) 'Introduction' and 'quatrième de couverture' (back cover) in *The First Man*. Translated by D. Hapgood, 1995. London, Penguin.

43 See Todd, O. (1996) *Albert Camus: Une Vie*. Paris, Gallimard.

without ethics, without guidance, without religion, but glad to be so and to be in the light»<sup>44</sup>.

The heterodiegetic/homodiegetic ambiguity employed in *The Plague* often has quite a different effect, it encourages a dynamic shift in perspective, demanding a weighing-up of differing viewpoints. The novel begins with the account of an anonymous third-person narrator, drawing on «his own testimony, [...] that of others [and] written texts which he has happened to acquire»<sup>45</sup>.

These first pages are from the perspective of an eye-witness, with a tone that is sometimes journalistic, sometimes confiding; we are given no other option but to accept the account of a narrator who is unwilling to disclose even their own identity. This plants a seed of suspicion in the mind of the reader, encouraging us to reflect on the sincerity of the narrator and our tendency as readers (and as humans) to project our own interpretations onto the actions and motives of others.

Later on however, the narrator acquires an omniscience, and is often able to report on the emotional and psychological states of others. This lulls us into a false sense of security, and the reader is more willing to accept the narrator's account as sincere and objective. This disequilibrium of trust is righted, however, when Dr Rieux reveals himself as

---

<sup>44</sup> Camus, *The First Man*, p. 150.

<sup>45</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, p. 3.

the first-person narrator in the first line of Part Five, and the reader is brought to reflect on their journey through empathy, mistrust and self-discovery. Such a shift is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's use of narrative and pseudonyms, which he explains thus:

‘Direct communication’ means to communicate the truth directly. ‘Communication in terms of reflection’ means *to beguile a person into the truth*. But since the aim of the movement is to attain simplicity, the communication, must sooner or later, end in direct communication. It began *maieutically* with esthetic works and all the pseudonymous works are maieutic. That indeed is the reason why these works were pseudonymous<sup>46</sup>.

Narrative in *The Plague* does indeed «end in direct communication» from Rieux, but not before beguiling us into reflection on the concepts of subjectivity and truth. Through the unveiling of the narrator as Rieux, our own judgements and inclinations are unveiled to us: our latent ideas are coaxed into clear consciousness. Camus once again demonstrates the philosophical potential of the novel, firmly holding his ground in the quarrel.

---

<sup>46</sup> Kierkegaard, S. (1998) *Kierkegaard's Writings, XXII: The Point of View*. New Jersey, Princeton. p. 7 (emphasis in the original).

#### 4. Words and Meaning

Camus' engagement with the quarrel operated on a large scale; he experimented with philosophical, literary and journalistic genres, and in many instances his texts succinctly weave dynamic and various perspectives. But Camus' struggles with rhetoric are also fine-grained in nature – not only the words themselves but also the spaces between them were of great importance to him.

During his early years as a writer, he consulted the author Malraux (a man whom he greatly admired) on matters of style. His personal correspondences from this period reveal further trails with stylistics. In writing *The Outsider*, Camus had «sought for dryness in exposition»<sup>47</sup>, 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»<sup>48</sup>. 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»<sup>49</sup>. In *The Outsider*,

---

47 As Camus wrote to his friend Pascal Pia on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1941 (translated by B. Ivry in Todd, *A Life*, p. 133).

48 Relayed to Camus by letter by Pia, dated May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1941 (translated by B. Ivry in Todd, *A Life*, p. 131).

49 In an unsent letter to the critic Rousseaux, 1942. (translated by B. Ivry in Todd, *A Life*, pp. 151-152).

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.

Not only did Camus struggle with the style of his texts, the individual words themselves posed challenges. In *The Plague*, Camus exposes the difficulty entailed in choosing the right words to bring about precise imagery in the mind of the reader.

This is through the would-be author, Grand who 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»<sup>50</sup>.

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

---

<sup>50</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, pp. 103-104.

on his third version of *La Peste*<sup>51</sup>. This anxiety towards the adequacy of words communicating the subjective experience is something that Camus spent a great deal of his career confronting.

An instance in which even Camus' nomenclature might encourage reflection on philosophical themes (particularly innocence, guilt and suffering) is that of Raymond Sintés in *The Outsider*, Meursault's violent and dubious friend who is in many ways responsible for beginning the chain of events leading to Meursault's conviction. Sintés 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 *The First Man*, a fictionalised autobiography, he describes the mother of the protagonist, Jacques Cormery – she led «a life resigned to suffering»<sup>52</sup>, «her gentleness was her faith»<sup>53</sup>, «she does not know Christ's life except on the cross, yet who is closer to it?»<sup>54</sup>. 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 – that he too has a comprehensible subjective reality.

---

51 Camus, *Une Vie*, p.330, translated by B. Ivry in Todd, *A Life*, p.131.

52 Camus, *The First Man*, p. 61.

53 *Ivi*, p. 129.

54 *Ivi*, p. 239.

## 5. Conclusion: A Philosophy Put into Image

Wittgenstein once remarked that:

in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case, as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be simile now seems to be mere nonsense<sup>55</sup>.

Such a stance suggests that rhetorical and literary form has no place in the world of philosophy, and indeed that poetry deserves no place in the *polis*. As we have seen though, Camus would beg to differ. When he suggested in 1938 that «[a] novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images»<sup>56</sup>, he offered his own solution to the «quarrel» between philosophy and the arts. Moral and philosophical meaning can be found precisely in the semantic gaps carved by rhetorical devices. Rather than dropping the simile, we should instead examine it as a whole, as we are looking

---

55 Wittgenstein, L. (1929). 'A Lecture on Ethics' in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 1965, pp. 3-12.

56 'A Review of Nausea by Jean-Paul Sartre' from *Alger Républiqueain* Newspaper, in *Selected Essays and Notebooks of Albert Camus*. Translated and edited by P. Thody, 1979. London, Penguin Twentieth Century Classics.

for the kind of ‘facts’ which cannot be expressed in direct, logical language. His philosophical texts are enriched with metaphor and imagery, and his literary works are given layers of meaning through rhetorical devices and techniques. Thus, Camus’ investigation of the relationship between literature and philosophy results in rich, nuanced linguistic form which drives at meanings ineffable and feelings inexpressible, demonstrating just how effective the is at provoking philosophical reflection.

So convinced is he of the intertwining relationship between creativity and ideas, Camus even suggests that Plato is in some ways on his side. He tells us that «Plato is moderately reasonable. He only calls in question the deceptive function of language and exiles poets from his republic. Apart from that, he considers beauty more important than the world»<sup>57</sup>. But Camus’ vision of the role of fiction in relation to philosophy is more complex than the concern with truth and beauty he accords to Plato. In his political philosophy, we have seen the importance he bestows to a comprehension of the self in relation to the Other, and this gestures towards yet another element of Camus’ stance in the quarrel.

Camus created fiction in an effort to reveal the sufferings and conundrums of others – inspiring philosophical reflection through literary form.

---

<sup>57</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 219.



## References

- Camus, A. (1938): *A Review of Nausea by Jean-Paul Sartre* from «Alger Républicain» Newspaper, in *Selected Essays and Notebooks of Albert Camus*, tr. and edited by P. Thody, 1979. London: Penguin Twentieth Century Classics.
- Camus, A. (1942): *The Outsider*, tr. edited by J. Laredo, London: Penguin, 1982.
- Camus, A. (1947): *The Plague*, tr. edited by R. Buss, London: Penguin, 2001.
- Camus, A. (1955): *The Plague, The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom*, London: Everyman's Library.
- Camus, A. (1956): *The Fall*, tr. edited by J. O'Brien, London: Penguin, 1957.
- Camus, A. (1971): *A Happy Death*, tr. edited by R. Howard, London: Penguin, 1972.
- Camus, A. (1971): *The Rebel*, tr. edited by H. Hamilton, London: Penguin, 1953.
- Camus, A. (1991): *Between Hell and Reason*, Essays from the «Resistance Newspaper Combat», 1944-1947, tr. by A. Gramont, Hanover: Wesleyan University Press.
- Camus, A. (1994): *The First Man*, tr. edited by D. Hapgood, London: Penguin, 1995.

Camus, A. (2008): *Œuvres complètes*, (4 vols.) edited by J. Lévi-Valensi et al. Paris: Gallimard.

Deleuze, G. (1990): *The Logic of Sense*, tr. edited by M. Lester, ed. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Denham, A. (2014): *Representing Ethical Estrangement*, paper presented at Art and Morality, Budapest, 4-5th June.

Locke, J. (1975): *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon. III.X.34.

Nussbaum, M. (1992): *Love's Knowledge*, Essays on «Philosophy and Literature», Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parker, E. (1966): *Albert Camus: Artist in the Arena*, Madison: Wisconsin University Press.

Plato, (2007): *The Republic*, tr. edited by D. Lee, London: Penguin.

Rizzuto, A. (1981): *Camus' Imperial Vision*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Todd, O. (1996): *Albert Camus: Une Vie*, Paris: Gallimard.

Todd, O. (1998): *Albert Camus: A Life*, tr. edited by B. Ivry, London: Vintage.

Wittgenstein, L. (1929): *A Lecture on Ethics* in «The Philosophical Review», vol. 74, No. 1, 1965.