

Affirming the Absurd

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The conception of Camus as primarily a novelist who was inclined to dabble in philosophy is an unduly prevalent one. However, the acute and particular conception that Camus outlines in 'The Myth of Sisyphus' of what exactly a novel is proceeds directly from that most fundamental and axiomatic realisation of all of his philosophy that reality is absurd, and is exemplary of what he characterises as an absurd existence. As a description of human reality, with stylisation rather than (speculative) rationalisation as its end, all artistic creation constitutes an investing of human life with human values, an affirmation of existence in spite of the metaphysical void. The absurd artist acknowledges the universal futility of both his life and his work and chooses to exult in both. Moreover, in recreating it to his own design, the artist can make sense of the world in a way that the rationalist or scientist never can. Through its artistic depiction, reality is subjugated to the artist's requirements of order, unity and coherence, thus he displays a mastery of his situation. It is fiction above all else which constitutes for Camus the epitome of successful living in the face of the absurd, embodying in a single act the three foremost ideals of revolt, freedom and passion, which are at the heart of absurd life. Working on the contention that through his career as a novelist Camus is essentially practising his philosophy as he preaches it, this essay examines Camus' acclamation of fiction as potentially instructive for both philosophy and for life.

For the absurd man, the necessary dispensing of any notions of objective value systems and the exposure of human-ascribed values as precisely that has the upshot that everything must now be viewed as fundamentally equivalent in an ethical respect. The mood in which pos-

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sibilities of experience are encountered from this impartial viewpoint is encapsulated by Meursault's unconcerned remark upon being pressed by his girlfriend on the subject of marriage; 'it's all the same to me.'¹ This obligatory indifference is what gives rise to the peculiar imperative of quantity. Having surmised that life in its entirety can find summation in the experience contained therein, Camus reasons that the identification of that experience as equivalent in value means that the only remaining means of evaluation of that life must be in terms of its extent: "if I admit my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living."² Thus the only way that we, as free and responsible beings, can truly improve our lives is by pushing its boundaries and broadening its scope.

This extension of life is, of course, to be taken not in the sense of mere existence, but of living to the full; of taking up as many of the world's offerings as is possible. Essentially 'what counts' is what Camus characterises as absurd living: "Being aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum."³ The absurd man must live with an appreciation of, and appetite for, life's possibilities, aiming to experience them in as large a quantity and as broad a range as possible, and he must do so through lucid and responsible choice. That the offerings of the world as artistic pabulum should be so numerous and diverse means that the potentialities for art are accordingly rich. The artist's freedom of choice in artistic creation extends to the far reaches of life itself, but as with philosophical understanding, can never stretch beyond it.

As an object of ontological analysis within the absurd, the process of artistic creation reveals the artist in a complex and multifaceted relationship with the world and his work. Primarily, it represents the living out of an existential choice. In addition to this, artistic creation is always aware of itself as a deliberate undertaking. Accordingly, it involves an intellectual effort. Lastly, we can consider the creation itself as some kind of new entity within the world (abstract, physical or whatever) in that 'there is a thing now which was not before'. Thus the creative act literally manifests quantity, generating existence along two planes. As a choice of living, it is simultaneously passive, conscious and prolific. Furthermore, the consciousness of the artist is demanded within both of these planes of existence. The engagement of the artist in the artistic process is a coincident experience of both the act of creation by himself, as artist, and of the created work itself, just as when we ex-

perience the work as an audience (this is especially obvious with the novel) we 'inhabit' both the familiar and tangible world of our existence and the artistically fabricated world of imagination. Ricoeur emphasizes this amplification of 'sense' within the novel:

[...] the world which is opened up... by writing is itself also a world which has an infinite horizon... Literature creates a world of fiction, of possibility, and, consequently, opens up a horizon of reality, too. Our sense of reality is multiplied by this world of fiction and possibility.⁴

Yet there is more to it than this. Since all possibilities are viewed as objectively equivalent, we may conclude that what is generated in art is in fact more of that stuff which comprises life itself: more experience. The transient cognitive occupation of a fictional universe through literature is as legitimate a possibility of existence as any other. "Creation" proclaims Camus, "is living doubly."⁵

The idea of 'living', however, must be read with all of its absurd implications. Any form of artistic reflection of the world is the reflection of it through its creator, and the resulting work can never be so easily separated from him. The strength of this involvement is indeed such that "the artist commits himself and becomes himself in his work."⁶ 'Commits himself' in that the artwork is not only something that is generated by the artist, but is an expansion of his own being in terms of his intentions, perspectives and ideas. Moreover, it is a record of the experience of the artistic process: it is determined by, and embodies, the choices and decisions that the artist makes. 'Becomes himself' in that it is only through this engagement in the artistic process that the artist, following his initial choice to be an artist, truly is one. In creating, he is also self-creating. This idea is shrewdly articulated in Robert Cumming's examination of Sartre's aesthetic position:

[...] the structure of the work of art embodies what the artist is conscious of, but since his consciousness has been inherently articulative and selective in its constructive activity, the structure of the work of art is also a structure of decisions, whose interrelationship composes the artist's "choice of himself." ... the work of art is implicitly a self-portrait.⁷

Thus the discrimination involved in all artistic creation entails a sort of second order existential choice. The artist defines himself by making concrete certain possibilities, both in his choice of himself as artist, and

within the art itself. He is existing twice, and bearing his freedom responsibly twice.

It is not difficult to see why Camus esteems fiction in particular as the greatest of all art forms. In fact, absurd fiction is exalted as a paradigm of absurd living and an exemplary manifestation of all the virtues that he ascribes to art as an absurd choice. An obvious preliminary observation is that in using language as its medium, fiction cannot fail to be overtly mimetic of reality.⁸ Language is not only our prime method of communication as human beings, but its very function is to express to us our world and our situation. As a means of human representation, language is paramount. Whilst music or dance may often seem perfectly suited to conveying emotion, abstract painting can seem to transcend conventional temporal restrictions, and photography's reproduction of the visual world is unmatched in its capacity for accuracy, the overall expressive capabilities of each is nonetheless severely restricted in comparison to literature. Even theatre (which as a literary creation employs many similar techniques and devices) is still comparatively limited in its representative capacities by its necessary structure of action. The novel, on the other hand, can conceive of entire universes. As such, the craftsmanship involved in the writing of a novel exemplifies artistically the ideal of quantity that Camus prescribes as a universal ethic for life under the absurd. Fiction, in representing the artist's situation, can represent it more fully than any other art form. It is a bigger, more comprehensive description of the world.

With such an inclusive diversity of aspect, the affirmation of the novelist is accordingly immense. In addition, this extensiveness of the novel above other art forms is also applicable to the revision of reality being proposed. Therefore the converse role of art as revolt is again magnified in fiction. Revolt is also inherently present in language by virtue of the organisation and coherence of its construction. Merely to speak is to impose a form of human order on an orderless world, to force it to conform to our requirements of understanding. Language is already a triumph in making human sense of the world. Of course the structural discipline of the novel extends far beyond its lingual substance; this in turn is bound by a skeletal literary structure which encompasses such elements as form, a temporal framework and the imposition of boundaries (chapters, divisions, the beginning and end of the

book etc.). Yoseph Milman notes that the traditional tripartite structure of the fictional narrative as background, characters and plot corresponds directly to the “three principle aspects of the world” where the feeling of the absurd is most prevalent, that is respectively “the ontological (the nature of objects or ‘things’), the psychological (man’s nature, feelings and motivations) and the existential (the purpose of human action and the meaning and value of life).”⁹ Thus the novel is fundamentally suited to absurd expression.

In choosing to write, the absurd novelist has already demonstrated a certain moral resolve. He has exercised his freedom in choosing, and in choosing to choose, his revolt against the apparent meaninglessness of his choice and his passion in his desire to create. Every absurd virtue that is manifested in the novel requires a conscious decision of the writer. That the artist must remain perpetually acutely aware of the futility of his task is merely a subsidiary upshot of his absurd consciousness, and yet still the effort of regarding his labours with a humble acceptance of their gratuity requires a moral discipline of admirable proportions. It is precisely this disciplined acceptance on the part of the artist which inspires that dynamic affirmation and denial of reality in fiction that operates at the very core of its being:

Art can never be so well served as by a negative thought. Its dark and humiliated proceedings are as necessary to the understanding of a great work of art as black is to white... Performing these two tasks simultaneously, negating on the one hand and magnifying on the other, is the way open to the absurd creator. He must give the void its colours.¹⁰

Even as an embodiment of a universally human ethical struggle, fiction is nonetheless always a personal undertaking of the writer and an expression of his individual revolt against his situation.

As the possibility of living in which man, in his extreme exposure to the absurd, feels most severely its exacting cries for integrity, artistic creation is also the one in which he is most keenly attuned to his unadorned existence in the world:

Of all the schools of patience and lucidity, creation is the most effective. It is also the staggering evidence of man’s sole dignity: the dogged revolt against his condition, perseverance in an effort considered sterile. 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 with which it provides him of overcoming his phantoms and approaching a little closer to his naked reality.¹¹

Thus artistic creation, and fiction particularly, is a deeply profound and enriching experience for the artist. Yet it is not only within the personal situation of the novelist that fiction may serve as a life asset.

I earlier identified fictional creation as exemplifying the quantitative ethic and in doing so highlighted the dual relationship of possibility concerning the artist and his work. As a finished product, standing on its own and subject to interpretation, the novel still incorporates this duality of possibility; firstly as the product of (and a documentation of) the creative process, and secondly as a possibility of further experience in virtue of its communicative abilities. This second possibility now stands in relation to the reader. If fiction adheres to the constraints of the absurd, then the involvement of the reader within its conceptual world will in many instances constitute an exploration of absurd possibilities. Through the inhabitation of a fictional universe, both the writer and the reader are able to explore hitherto personally uncharted avenues of absurd reality through the fictional narrative. The hypothetical, conceptual nature of the novel, coupled with its conspicuously phenomenological character, means that it can act as instructive by allowing one to experience something in the reading or writing of it that would be unattainable in the ‘real’ world.¹² Thus Camus praises the classical French novel for its persistent yet disciplined pursuit of passions to their limit: “they teach us the mathematics of destiny which are a means of freeing ourselves from it.”¹³ If there is a sense in which the absurd novel may be said to act as a means of escapism for the deluded reader, it is by enabling him to assume, through the use of imagination, an alternative perspective, to extricate himself from the network of involvements which constitutes his usual world of experience.¹⁴

Whilst in life we are constantly confronted with an often indistinct and confused variety of representations, the absurd novel provides us with a purer view of the world. Thus, as with phenomenology, in

representing to us authentically our absurd situation, literature allows us to reach a clearer understanding of it. The elucidatory advantages of assuming the sort of perspective whereby we are not implicated within our familiar world is excellently illustrated by Joseph Fell's image of the astronaut, whose accomplishment of a vast distance from his usual worldly perspective is quite literal. From faraway, he is able to see this world "within a part of which we are usually preoccupied, as a whole, standing out in isolation against a field of black and empty nothingness."¹⁵ The astronaut, in his lonely capsule, must feel keenly his helplessness in relation to the affairs of the world that he surveys. Yet upon his return to earth he may still retain an acute alertness to the contextual scope of his own existence. Such is the observational position of the reader of the novel, who in assuming the perspective of a helpless spectator, quite detached from his usual situation, is thus able to view it with a fullness and lucidity which he would not usually attain. Yet this lucidity may persist upon his disengagement from this position. It is in this way that absurd literature is conducive to an absurd sensibility.

With regard to the first of the novel's instantiations of experience, I have already intimated certain ways in which the novel is exemplary of the demands of revolt, freedom and passion which configure life in the face of the absurd. Fiction, declares Camus, should be "that exercise in detachment and passion which crowns the splendour and futility of a man's life."¹⁶ It is discernible that a glance to fiction as demonstrative of these ethical principles may be instructive for our behaviour in this regard. There are yet other ways in which the absurd novel may serve as an object lesson for absurd life. The apprehension and manipulation of reality in absurd fiction is a model instance of the valid imposition of a structure on randomness. We can learn from the way in which it faces reality head on, embracing it in all its chaos; its readiness to challenge its situation; its attention to life and its control over it. "This art", affirms Camus, "is... born of an infinite possibility of suffering and of a firm decision to master this suffering by means of language."¹⁷ The efficacy of the novel in its apprehension of the tools at our disposal is similarly estimable. As an exploration of, and creative use of, its artistic medium, it is effectively "giving man, in his struggle against destiny, the powers of language."¹⁸ The simultaneous solitariness and solidarity of the novel, in both evoking the personal revolt and perspectives of its author, and at the same time being the 'public' product of a time and culture, is an actual reconciliation of the artist's personal struggle and revolt with his naturally social existence. Further-

more, as a communicative phenomenon, the novel objectifies the abstract element of discursive relations between human beings. Its dual nature as at once both textually fixed, the product of its author, and an abstract focus of subjective interpretation, makes explicit the conflict of intentions that is characteristic of all discourse.

It has already been noted that in his imaginative engagement with the text, the reader is provided with an unusual opportunity of disentangling himself from the network of involvements which constitutes his usual world of experience, and thus of seeing the world from an atypical perspective. However, we must not forget the novel's identity as the intentional product of its author. The relationship between the three entities involved is essentially a discursive one, with the novel functioning as the intermediary abstract element of the conversation, but bound by the static physicality of the text. But the dialogue has only one direction. It is a transmission of suggestion from the novelist to his reader. In entering cognitively into the immaterial realm of the narrative the reader is able to survey the fictional world from within, and in doing so is invited to take up its perspectives; not only as a transient observer, but also as an individual: as the reader. The novel is never innocent of suggestion. Just as the artist cannot help but get caught up in his work, to the extent that he 'commits himself' within it by means of his intentions, discriminations, actions, and so forth, so this involvement may carry over into the reader's own life. The distinctions between the possibilities of experience of the fictional world and of the 'real' world begin to blur as the reader, as essentially a 'trans-world' consciousness, starts to become susceptible to the ideas contained within the novel. Of course the absurd novel, by definition, will not contain any semblance of argument, but to commend the description as pure is not to say that it is not opinionated. As the product of choice and discrimination, the novel is always representative of a particular perspective. Just as phenomenology claims to discover philosophy in any aspect of experience, so the novel can put forward a case without actually stating it.

This peculiar persuasive character of the novel, its facility to provide a means by which the writer may collude with the reader in understanding reality, makes it particularly suited to the sort of curious, investigative approach that Camus, as a firm disciple of the Copernican turn, characteristically employs. His philosophy is not done from 'outside' of life, as it were, but takes as its perspective that phenomenological of one within human existence. It first realises itself as a product of the human situation - that of thrownness in the world - and then

starts to inquisitively explore within it, making observations and taking notes as it does, until it recognises that it has reached its limit. Having reached this limit, it reassesses its situation in light of its observations, and draws the appropriate conclusions. As Merleau-Ponty in his characterisation of phenomenology explains, “the only pre-existent Logos is the world itself... the philosophy which brings it into visible existence does not begin by being possible; it is actual or real like the world of which it is a part.”¹⁹ Similarly, the novel does not confront the reader with a view of things, but rather lays it out around the reader for the reader to explore for himself. It engages the reader within its midst through its characters and its narrative, and in doing so gives the reader an idea of what its like to be within a certain world; a world that it is constructed with the ideas of the novelist. Despite his denial of its pertinence to such ‘existentialist philosophers’, the standpoint from which the absurd is recognised and presented very much resembles David Wiggins’ characterisation of the ‘participant perspective’ which “can contain together both the perception of incongruity and a nice appreciation of the limited but not necessarily infinitesimal importance of this or that particular object of concern.”²⁰ It is a matter of ‘zooming out’; of adopting a perspective that is so detached from the absorbing world of everyday concerns of artificial significance, that they can be seen within the vast context of metaphysical nullity, and our focus on them thus farcical in its disproportionateness. However, the perspective is never so detached as to be removed from the world it is reviewing; the considerations are not considered as separate or incompatible.

By including the reader imaginatively within the ideational schema and thus allowing him an opportunity of experience of the ideas being proposed, the novel may bring the reader to acknowledge them in a way that he perhaps otherwise could not, or may naturally resist. This proposition is explored in depth by Cora Diamond, who advocates the notion of non-argumentative ‘convincing’ by just such an imaginative ‘appeal to our intelligence’ as is effected in the novel, within the context of moral philosophy. She does so on the basis that it is exactly these sorts of imaginative capacities, as are employed by fiction, that we naturally use in our moral self-definition. Similarly, Camus’ philosophy, as a working through of absurd implications, is characterised by its concern with what it now means to be a human being: how we can, how we should, and why we should live. *The Myth of Sisyphus* famously opens with the question of suicide: “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of

philosophy.”²¹ Practically, to judge whether life is worth living amounts to an exploration of what it is to live. The Myth of Sisyphus gives a philosophical answer to a philosophical question, but as to providing an account of life, it is far from complete, and is thus perhaps better conceived as the laying down of the format in which the study is to be conducted. Camus’ expansion of his writing style to the novel is effectively an assertion that the traditional format of philosophical inquiry (the essay, the argument, the critical text) is inadequate for his purposes. It is a progressive accommodation of, and appreciation for, the shrewd, and yet quite blatant observation that “(w)e get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking.”²² It is an extension of philosophy’s methodology to the descriptive realm of artistic creation, a vital development of its scope. Such an extension allows it not only a better access to those areas of its concern that Camus identifies as elemental to its task, but more significantly, a better means of communicating those ideas.²³ The erroneousness of the common categorisation of Camus as “a novelist with a strong philosophical bent.”²⁴ is effectively summed up by a judicious remark of Wittgenstein’s: “People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc. to give them pleasure. The idea that these have something to teach them - that does not occur to them.”²⁵

Notes

1. Camus, *L’Etranger*, p.64.
2. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.59.
3. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.61.
4. Erik Nakjavani, ‘Phenomenology and Theory of Literature: An Interview with Paul Ricoeur’ in *Interview: The Critical Exchange*, p.1086.
5. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.87.
6. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.89
7. R. Cumming, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, p.29.
8. Although this is such a familiar characteristic that we would not usually take it into account when analysing the novel as a work of art, i.e. with reference to its meaning and intentions, as we might with say, the choice of material for sculpture. Camus’ demand that art must always remain within the parame-

ters of description and not attempt to explain the world is a direct outcome of that most rudimentary and foundational observation of all of Camus' philosophy that 'as human beings, we are simply not equipped to deal with the world from outside of the scope in which it exists.' The avowal of the absurd man to confine himself to description stems from the same motive as that of phenomenology: a denial of the justification of any other means. It aims to derive its account of reality from the only possible source of human experience, but at a point before human explanation impairs reasonable analysis. An explicit discussion of the resemblances of an absurd life and phenomenology occurs in 'Philosophical Suicide' within the Chapter 'An Absurd Reasoning' in 'The Myth of Sisyphus', although as the title suggests, the subject is broached within the context of Husserl's philosophy with the intent of exposing its shortcomings in relation to an absurd philosophy.

9. Yoseph Milman, *Opacity in the writings of Robbe-Grillet, Pinter and Zach – A Study in the Poetics of Absurd Literature*, p.11.
10. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 103.
11. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.104.
12. Indeed, Camus frequently uses fictional characters to explore absurd possibilities. Fiction is a perfect context for an exploration of the full implications of living the absurd life, as it involves fictional consequences. For example, Meursault, in *The Outsider*, becomes a martyr for the absurd. Similarly, each of Camus' examples of 'the absurd man' is drawn from literature (Don Juan, Sisyphus etc.). It is easy to see how it might be easier to attribute a certain consistency of virtues to a fictional life than to assimilate those virtues into one's own life.
13. *Intelligence and the Scaffold*, p.159.
14. To employ a Heideggerian characterisation of what is essentially the human perspective.
15. Joseph Fell, *Heidegger and Sartre: An Essay on Being and Place*, p.108.
16. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.94.
17. *Intelligence and the Scaffold*, p.157.
18. *Intelligence and the Scaffold*, p.157.

19. Merleau-Ponty, preface to *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p.xx.
20. David Wiggins, 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life' in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, p.114.
21. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.11.
22. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.15.
23. 'More significantly' because the first achievement of the novel as philosophy, as we have seen, mirrors the achievement of phenomenology in assuming a descriptive methodology, and because the communication of ideas is, in practice, of equal importance to any discipline as the occurrence of those ideas.
24. Egan, David, Spark Note on *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 'Context'.
25. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p.36e

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