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# Between Solitude and Solidarity: Objectification in the Existential Novels of Camus and Naipaul

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"It would be impossible to insist too much on the arbitrary nature of the former opposition between art and philosophy... They interlock, and the same anxiety merges them." (Camus 1991a, 96-97).

## The Absurd and Philosophical Literature

Works of fiction become philosophical, in part, when they endeavor to glean ontological significance from the psychological struggles of their subjects. The characters in a philosophical novel are often presented as confronting the futility of their actions as they reconcile themselves to a narrative structure that is presented to them as an *a priori* necessity. It is the "given-ness" of the narrative structure that awakens the character to the absurdity of their existence. That the narrative precedes the character and presupposes their role in a story's development opens the character to a psychological schism between solitude and solidarity. Solitude – because they alone must choose whether or not to reconcile themselves to the imposition of this external structure; and solidarity – because their reconciliation must take place among those others who also occupy various roles within the external structure.

The purpose of this essay is to pursue the rift from which the confrontation with the absurd arises. From the tension between solitude and solidarity comes a reflection upon the how the subject may or may not be reconciled with the narrative structure within which it is embedded. To do so will require focus and the philosophically salient features of this confrontation will be compared

as they manifest in the works of two twentieth-century authors who are thematically related: Albert Camus and V. S. Naipaul. Through a dialogue with these writers, we shall discover the schism between solitude and solidarity, thereby revealing the source of our confrontation with the absurd.

Camus rejects the sharp distinction between art and philosophy (1991a, 96-97) and encourages us to examine the generalities represented by a novel's symbolism so that we may derive meaningful interpretations from a text (124). With this advice in mind, we look at Naipaul's work to explore continuities in symbolic forms that might lead to a complimentary reading of two authors who speak from the post-colonial condition. Each presents us with a confrontation with the absurd that stems from primordial conflicts within the psychology of their characters. Such conflicts spring from social and historical narratives external to a character's psyche and narratives that are recounted as the characters' own, from their own subjective histories. These conflicts present characters faced with a choice between solitude and solidarity, and so give rise to the absurd condition.

### Absurdity and Objectification

The absurd condition is derivative of the way in which subjects are objectified. Simone de Beauvoir has theorized this condition as the fundamental ambiguity of human existence: that we are at once a subject, for-ourselves, but also objects both within our own projects and within the projects of others (1978, 7). Human beings attempt to assert themselves in the world, to remake the world in the image of their own hopes and projects, and yet, they must also bear the recalcitrant weight of the world of which they are a part and into which they are thrown. It is in this meeting of the subject's projection and the world's obstinate resistance to that project that the absurd arises. It is there in between the human and their world that the feeling of the absurd arises (Camus 1991a, 28). On the one hand, the absurd arises because humanity has such high hopes for the world and the world answers their hopes with silence. On the other, whatever answers are ready to hand are only human answers, all to human, and find their source not in the longed for transcendental order of the universe, but only from the mean whims of human society and its history. In the story on offer the human being is nothing but a passing object and it is in this objectification that we find the point of tension between solitude and solidarity. When characters are shown attempting to live on their own terms, to claim their lives as their own, we see them taking responsibility for themselves instead of allowing not only their actions but also their values to be determined by social and historical circumstance. In their rejection of a socially constructed historic

narrative that precedes them, a character is rejecting the world as it is. The socio-historic narrative is presented to the subject as a brute fact of the world. The absurd revelation is that the socio-historic narrative is not a brute fact. This negation frees the subject to create a narrative, to tell a story instead of fulfilling a role in a story told by someone else. But once divorced from the given narrative the subject resides in solitude.

To illustrate, let us consider the title character from Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Mohun Biswas is objectified according to the social rules to which his Hindu family adheres in their attempts to preserve an Indian heritage in their foreign Caribbean home. At stake are Mohun's identity and the role he will play in Trinidad society, into which he was born and in which he must live. A pundit, or holy man, comes to visit Mohun's parents shortly after Mohun is born. The pundit gives a prediction of Mohun's character and livelihood, saying, "The boy will be a lecher and a spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well" (Naipaul 2001, 16). The bizarre circumstance of his father's death secures the truth of the pundit's words for Mohun. Believing that Mohun is drowning in a pond, his father rushes in vain to save his son – but Mohun is not there, and his father drowns instead. Mohun himself was hiding elsewhere to avoid the blame for a neighbor's drowned calf, also a victim of the pond (28-30). The tragic death of his father seems to confirm the pundit's omen that he should be kept "away from trees and water" (16) to avoid the "evil this boy will undoubtedly bring" (17). By accepting and bearing the objectification forced on him by the pundit's authority Mohun must always fulfill a certain role in his life's narrative and the narrative of his social milieu. Within this role, Mohun is always at fault. He is the guilty one. He is guilty of his father's death and for his family's misfortunes before they even occur. With this role as his only solace it is easy to see how Mohun reaches the absurd. To be absolved of his guilt he must rebel against his objectification as the guilty one.

Conversely, consider the perspective of the one who objectifies others, rather than the one who is objectified. In the famous scene from Camus's *The Stranger* we see the character Meursault on a beach prior to the climactic encounter with an unidentified Arab man. Meursault's friend, Raymond, believes a certain group of Arabs to be a threat (Camus 1989, 48). Meursault is pulled into the narrative by his association with Raymond and, following a tense moment involving the group of Arabs, is given a gun for protection (56). In taking over the gun, Meursault seems to also take over the narrative, claiming it as his own and internalizing it as he slips the gun into his pocket. Meursault immediately recognizes the choice posed to him by the gun. He muses, "It was then I realized that you could either shoot or not shoot" (56). Following this exchange, Meursault heads off down the beach alone. In his mind, "To stay or

go, it amounted to the same thing” (57). When he again encounters a single Arab man, the two of them alone together, Meursault is encountering what has become an object playing a role in his narrative – the role of the enemy. This person has always been merely an enemy in Meursault’s eyes. As such, the Arab man is the object that is to be shot should the decision need to be made. To make the point stick Camus gives us so little information about the Arab man except that he is, in fact, an Arab man wearing overalls. Then, he writes Meursault as carrying the reduction even further. On his approach, Meursault observes, “But most of the time, he was just a form shimmering before my eyes in the fiery air” (58). It is one thing to shoot a living subject with hopes, desires, fears, and project for the world in which you yourself could play a part. It is entirely different to shoot a mere shimmering form. Indeed, this form is Meursault’s enemy. It exists now as the thing that is to be shot.

Clearly, objectification generates conflict. How to respond to the problem of objectification? If Beauvoir is correct, then it is an inescapable condition of the human experience. A choice divides us and brings us, in our ambiguity, face to face with the absurd. We must choose between solitude and solidarity.

### Rebellion and Solitude

Camus writes sympathetically of the rebellion staged by the individual subject against objectification and claims that the contradiction arising from this rebellion is that “man rejects the world as it is without recognizing the necessity of escaping it...Far from wanting to forget it, they suffer, from not being able to possess it completely enough, estranged citizen’s of the world” (1991b, 260). He expresses the weight of the solitude imposed by the subject’s rejection of the external narratives into which it is casted. A similar estrangement figures prominently in Naipaul’s *Half a Life*. In this novel, Willie Chandran repeatedly finds himself estranged from the culture in which he is making a life: first, in his homeland of India, then as a student in Britain, and finally, as a husband and estate owner during the final days of Belgian colonialism in Africa. Willie seeks to possess the world, to have it live up to his expectations. In Britain, he hopes to interact with a community of intellectuals at Speaker’s Corner. Naipaul recounts Willie’s disappointment:

He didn’t expect to see the idle scatter of people around half a dozen talkers, with the big buses and the cars rolling indifferently by all the time. Some talkers had very personal religious ideas, and Willie remembering his own home lie, thought that the families of these men might have been glad to get them out of the house in the afternoons (Naipaul 2002, 50).

Willie’s rebellion against his Indian values led him to expect certain alternatives in British culture and especially among British intellectuals. It was, after all, Willie’s father who introduces the British intellectual as a figure of esteem in Willie’s life. His middle name is Somerset, after Somerset Maugham, whom his father had briefly met (2002, 3-5). Though the story of his father is one Willie cannot escape, he rejects it outright after hearing it and enters into isolation (2002, 35). Willie’s own story thus begins with his rejection of the paternal narrative. Therein begins the struggle for a life of his own. But such a life is elusive as long as Willie defines his experiences in terms of his father’s story. Of course, the unhappiness of Willie’s solitude is predicated upon his thrownness – on the fact that he finds himself thrust into a world that he neither chose nor established for himself and yet must nevertheless make his way (Beauvoir 1978, 35). His father’s narrative, against which he struggles, thereby appears to him as an irrefutable fact of the world, just as the pundit’s decrees seem stamped with the seal of destiny to Mohun Biswas, or the Arab man is taken up as “the enemy” by Meursault, as if Raymond has revealed a fundamental truth of the world when he hands over the gun. Willie’s disappointment at Speaker’s Corner reflects his disappointment in the intellectual life of his home precisely because it does not afford him the escape for which he longed. Indeed, it is yet another facticity that he had not established. The idea of Speaker’s Corner he had constructed for himself and projected onto the world in the form of his expectations was met with an incongruous reality in which people other than he had already determined the nature of the place. He had been determined to find an escape from India in Britain only to be greeted by a set of social rules and obligations just as hollow to Willie as those in his homeland. The discovery is both surprising to him and deeply upsetting. It throws him back onto himself, reminding him once again of his impotent efforts to make a world for himself.

Such is the emotive response to the sudden realizations that our own expectations and interpretations are proving to be inaccurate in some significant respects. Return to Meursault, who is faced with interpretations of his actions rendered by the prosecuting attorney, renditions that are antithetical to Meursault’s own recollection of the same events. Meursault describes his mother’s funeral and the days immediately after the burial rites. Meursault is continually cast in the values of French-Algerian society throughout these days; cast in roles by people who objectify Meursault in ways that run counter to his own perception of himself. During his trial, the prosecutor vilifies Meursault for accepting a cup of coffee during his mother’s wake (Camus 1989, 91). The claim is that any moral person among the jurors “will conclude that a stranger may offer a cup of coffee, but that beside the body of the one

who brought him into the world, a son should have refused it" (91). The account is contrary to Meursault's own narrative of the event in which the caretaker serves coffee to everyone at the vigil, all of whom share in the refreshment without comment (11). Along with the coffee incident, the fact the Meursault did not cry at his mother's funeral is used at his trial as evidence to convince the jury that he is an amoral killer. He must be objectified as a coldblooded murderer for the jury to perceive him as "guilty." Indeed, he must be more than guilty – for certainly, Meursault *is guilty* of the crime – but the jury must also believe that he deserves to die for the crime he committed. Fundamental to Meursault's solitude is his obstinate bad faith. He withholds from his own consciousness, until the last possible moment, the fact of his own responsibility and the real consequences of the action he has undoubtedly committed. His "no!" is thus twofold. The negation is directed at the others, at the prosecutor's interpretations but also toward the very being of the Arab man whose possibilities have been totally usurped and annihilated by Meursault's objectification of him, but the negation is, at the same time, turned on Meursault himself, who refuses to acknowledge and thereby bear responsibility for his deeds. This self-deceptive negation of the fact of his action is the essence of bad faith (Sartre 1994, 48). Willie, too, can be seen to operate in bad faith. He is constantly negating his own being in order to find a meaning for himself already inscribed in the order of the world presented to him, though he finds this effort aborted by the failure of the world to meet his expectations for it. He thus deceives himself about the nature of his own projects and thereby defers the reconciliation that would bring him out of solitude and establish the opportunity for solidarity between he and the others with whom he meets the world.

Meursault's rebellion is waged from his self-imposed and near total isolation. It is isolation from others, certainly, but also, through his living in bad faith, isolation from his own being. Others are in control of his life and are ready to decide who is his friend or enemy and whether he is to live or die. He is alone, the absurd man. His rejection of the social roles projected on him the prosecutor, the judge, his friend Raymond, and the jury extends beyond the social setting to his very condition. Meursault is a metaphysical rebel in the end (Camus 1991b, 23). But his living, continuous bad faith leads to the ultimate self-negation in which Meursault embraces his own annihilation in death. "For everything to be consummated," Meursault concludes, "for me to feel less alone, I had only wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate" (Camus 1989, 123). His own self-negation is solidified in the cries of the other who condemn him and he at last obtains total objectification in the final erase of his own subjectivity as such. He *becomes an object in fact*, that is, a corpse, nothing but a body.

The lesson taught by Meursault is the lesson Willie Chandran must eventually learn. The path of rebellion leads, not just to solitude, but risks absolute annihilation when carried through unto death. Nevertheless, when the negation of our condition becomes our primary occupation we must face a symbolic death of sorts and walk away. Willie's decision to leave his wife in Africa is a decision to let his life on the colonial estate die. It is a decision that arrives after a symbolic awakening. After suffering a fall on the stairs, Willie experiences a lapse in consciousness (Naipaul 2002, 127). If we understand consciousness in its existential dimension as a being for which the question of its own existence arises because it finds itself among other beings that it is not (Heidegger 2010, 11; Sartre 1994, 47) we then see Willie's loss of consciousness after the fall as an instance of the negation of the fundamental negation at the core of his being. This is to say, he finds the possibility of his transcendence toward certain possibilities becoming closed off and must, upon awakening, begin to sort out those future possibilities that remain open to him and among which he can still choose. Upon waking, he feels as though he is living his wife's life. In rejecting her he rejects the part of himself that is living by her side (Naipaul 2002, 128). But facing this symbolic death, the end of one set of possible futures, is not easily endured and must be admitted a sacrifice. In the end, doubt still overshadows Willie. Whether to stay in Africa or flee to Portugal to escape the revolution, it amounts to the same things, as Meursault had said. It amounts to Willie leaving his wife's life. To this she replies, "Perhaps it wasn't really my life either" (211).

Unless Willie will share Meursault's fate as well as his lesson he must do more than simply affirm himself against others. He must affirm himself as one self among others. This means accepting *some* of the ways in which others objectify him. That is, there must be some social roles into which he can be reconciled. Merleau-Ponty offers insight into this dynamice when he writes, "Everything that I 'am'... I never am completely for myself... I may well be these things for other people, nevertheless I remain free to posit another person as a consciousness whose views strike through to my very being, or... merely as an object" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 505). With this in mind, we turn to consider solidarity.

### Affirmation in Solidarity

If perpetual rebellion against others ultimately results in rebellion against our own selves, and thus, a rejection of our own life in death, then we must afford ourselves an alternative to Meursault's metaphysical rebellion. Though we reject objectification, we in turn objectify others in our attempts to right the world. So, it is not the case that objectification is, in itself, necessarily evil,

nor is it the origin of our absurd character. Indeed, it is necessary that my “No” to some condition of my life is at once a “No” to those who established it and the project I establish for myself is, at least in part, also a project against certain aspects of the project of the others (Beauvoir 1978, 96-97). My successful application to a job posting is at once the denial of that job to the others who applied. Further, we must take the other as an object in our projects *even when that project aims at the good of the other*. The medical doctor who would operate on their patient must, when the cut is made, view that person as merely a body to worked upon. The inner life and feelings of the patient cannot bear too heavily upon the surgeon in the moments they lay upon the table, though the doctor knows they operate under the patient’s consent and for their health. The absurdity arises from the psychology of the character, from the confrontation that is experienced between acceptance and rejection, from the choice between solitary rebellion and affirmation in solidarity. It is from the given solidarity that rebellion happens. In the case of Naipaul’s characters we have seen this rebellion occur from the solidarity of the family units that present cultural milieus that cannot get beyond themselves. Due to his much-expanded purview of the world Willie is finally able to generalize his rebellion much more than Mohun, breaking from the familial solipsism that dominated his youth. Camus’s characters find themselves enmeshed in a society that has already provided given generalizations about the world beyond their own culture. Meursault’s primary struggle is against French-Algerian society and the roles it affords him as given. His own account is always counter to what society says about him, about what other people say about him. These other people are strangers to Meursault. He finds himself beyond the reach of his own culture.

But to affirm ourselves and to affirm our own values we must be able to affirm certain ways in which we are objectified by embracing roles in society with others. We see Mohun teetering on the brink of despair groping for a way to climb back from his solitude. Naipaul writes, “He sank into despair as into the void which, in his imaging, had always stood for the life he had yet to live... He discovered in himself only a great unwillingness, and that part of his mind which feared the consequences of such a withdrawal was increasingly stilled” (2001, 474). Mohun understands intuitively that he must act. Moreover, he must act among the others against whom he wages his rebellion. Unless he is willing to destroy himself he must enter society and make his place and peace. Willie imagines there is no future life for him. The void stands for the life he has yet to live, a life he has not yet chosen for himself. As long as the choice is not made, the future holds nothing. Our projects give us a transcendent sense of a future in which the completion of a project is a fate of our own design. None of these projections occur in solitude, though the origins of a

project may reside in a void such as Mohun’s. Eventually, he emerges from despair to reinvest in a social order. Indeed, the opportunity for Mohun to affirm himself is presented to him through the others from which he feels alienated: “Suddenly, quite suddenly, he was revived... One morning he found a note on his desk requesting him to interview the newly arrived head of the Community Welfare Department” (Naipaul 2001, 475). By laying claim to this opportunity, Mohun is moving from his solitary rebellion into a new mode of being, a mode in which he attempts to redefine himself within the narrative structure. He will fulfill a new role. Mohun understands this new role to be a choice he has made and, having chosen it for himself, is a role in which the contradiction between his expectations of the world and its actuality are accepted in the fullness of their ambiguity. His expectations are open, and the world, however it may manifest, could meet them.

In his second novel, *The Plague*, Camus presents us with a way to escape the crushing metaphysical rebellion of Meursault and provides some answers to Mohun’s despair. There remains a rebellion staged against the world – against the plague and the conditions of quarantine and death imposed upon the citizenry of Oran – but the struggle is one that is shared. The whole population of Oran at once feels the burden of life under the plague (Camus 1991c, 67). Camus writes, “No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotion was the sense of exiles and of deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of fear and revolt set up by these” (1991c, 167). In this state of solidarity there is revealed the we-subject of a collectivity of individuals whose self-identity is formed through the mutual recognition of an immutable historical context. The socio-historic narrative is recognized as more than a happenstance thrown up by weak-willed humanity. Part of the characteristic rebellion of humanity, in particular those adolescent rebellions experiences in youth, arises when we discover the subjectivity of others and begin to realize the roles in which we have been thrust are no more than the constructs of others who know no better than us (Beauvoir 1978, 39). But the brute fact of the plague and analogous circumstances overshadows everyday objectifications while alienating characters from the roles in which they were formerly objectified. The ability to view the socio-historic narrative as a mere social construction is lost under the weight of the crisis. Facing mortality together, forced into mutual rebellion against an absurd situation, each character is revealed to the others *as such*. We acknowledge the existence of the other as subjects – that they must always be more than they appear to us as objective parts of our own projects (Sartre 1994, 429). It reveals their mortality and thus, their contingency. More than that, it reveals the importance of the other in defining roles for ourselves.

What is the surgeon without their patient? Without the other there is no place for the one (Beauvoir 1989, xxii-xxiv).

Two characters in *The Plague* illustrate the dependence of subjects on the others among whom they live: Dr. Reix and his friend Tarrou. Camus describes the two men taking a swim together. Under the plague, the sea had been off-limits to those under quarantine (Camus 1991c, 256). Reix reflects that, “a strange happiness possessed him. Turning to his Tarrou, he caught a glimpse on his friend’s face of the same happiness, a happiness that forgot nothing, not even murder” (256). This is the acknowledgement of existence as such, without declaring roles for one another and loading the situation with superfluous expectations of prescribed behaviors. There is in fact a recognition and mutual affirmation of their rebellion against those objectifications, in this case, the roles dictated by the plague. “Really, it’s too damn silly living only in and for the plague,” Tarrou says, “Of course, a man should fight for the victims, but if he ceases caring for anything outside that, what’s the use of his fighting” (256). Solidarity takes on a new importance in the process of defining ourselves. However, this importance can only be revealed to us from the perspective of rebellion. It is from rebellion that we break from an imposed solidarity to take stock of our own values. But the affirmation of these newly formulated self-images must occur among and with others. All that is forged in the solitude of rebellion are the ways in which we wish to be viewed by others. They become the sign and symbols by which we reveal ourselves as subject to the other subjects with whom we share the world.

### New Individualities

I am reminded of a fragment of Sappho that was translated, “I don’t know what to do / Two states of mind in me” (2003, 107), to which Kant could easily contribute, “One grows *wary* from *inactivity*” (1996, 38). The characters analyzed throughout this essay are psychologically torn. They rebel against the world, against society, and against themselves. But their rebellion isolates them – it puts them at an infinite distance from those around them who are rejected along with the world. To get back to those from which they are alienated, indeed, to return to themselves, these characters must enter into a new mode of solidarity in which they may make a self-affirmation. In this new affirmation we see the momentary dissolution of objectification and the reemergence of an objectification that it is possible to embrace. Reix and Tarrou were not objectifying one another in the moment. It may even be that Willie Chandran and his estranged wife were no longer objectifying one another in those roles. In the end, they were honest. In this honesty, in openness with one another, the characters found not the old objects and roles, but a functional element of

their own identities. One character finds another upon whom they depended and from whom interdependent roles derived meaning. This happens most clearly between Reix and Tarrou who act as exemplars. Others serve as warnings: the alienated Willie and his wife, and Meursault who ends in annihilation.

Without the social world in which we interact we grow weary of inactivity, as Kant put it. We cannot act in solitude lest we take up the burdens of the hermit and recluse or unless we accept annihilation. So, weary from the bad faith of the choice not to choose we made the leap to the only thing left to us, which is to make a way for ourselves in the world. Camus wrote about characters who make this choice, “They choose, and give us as an example the only original rule of life today: to learn to live and to die, and, in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god” (1991b, 306). The reason may be because a god can stand alone. A god is beyond the world and creating a place for the world itself. But humanity is different and can express its solitude only in reference to the community that offers solidarity. It is within community that we express our new individualities, individualities derivative of the we-subject that is shared with others. Alive in relation to others, embedded alongside them in the world, we find absurdity as well as an opportunity for transcendence. The contradiction that takes us beyond ourselves allows us to become who we are in a process that realizes more fully what we mean to be. It is between solitude and solidarity that we find out who we really are.

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## The Place of Consignation, or Memory and Writing in Derrida's Archive

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More than a theoretical account of the figure and concept of the archive in general, Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995) closely reads Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's "Monologue with Freud" chapter in the scholar's *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (1991). To the unacquainted, this is the missing third term, between *Archive Fever* and the relevant texts of the Freudian corpus.<sup>1</sup> The triangulation rests on the Moses of Michelangelo, which in turn rests on the Moses of the Old Testament. The investigation of archive as a conceptual concern—Derrida's original title was "The Concept of the Archive: A Freudian Impression"—was delivered at the Freud Museum in London on the 5th of June 1994.<sup>2</sup> Yerushalmi's absence on this particular occasion seems to be all the more fortuitous, given Derrida's lengthy discussion of "Monologue with Freud" as an address to an absent listener, a ghost. Yet the title of the work changed, from presentation to publication, to "archive fever," or *mal d'archive*.

To what does this enigmatic heading refer? It enjoys multiple referents: in one sense, it refers to "death drive." Later it also comes to name the need for, desire for, and sickness of desire for the archive, that is, homesickness or nostalgia for the archive. It thus entails an always situated or embeddedness in a Janus-faced relation to time and space: both looking backward and toward the future, as well as with interior consignation depending on its exteriority to some other thing. To be *en mal de* signifies to be amidst an already temporalized relationship to the past and future, that is, to history and memory but also the future and the virtual. This retrospection and looking toward