

Creation Corrected: Philosophy, Rebellion, and Literature in the Work of Albert Camus

MATTHEW SHARPE

Abstract: This article challenges views which identify Albert Camus' philosophy of art and artistic creation with his position in *Myth of Sisyphus*, a position which he soon moved beyond, as we show in part 1. In the longer part 2 of the paper, I argue that Camus developed and worked with not less than four different ideas of art and artistic creation across his works: those of absurd creation, a restrained neoclassicism associated with the classical French novel, the idea of "creation corrected" which predominates in the sections on art in *The Rebel*; and the idea of art as bearing witness in a period of political absolutisms and totalistic ideologies, a vision which is stressed in his speeches surrounding the award of the Nobel Prize in 1957.

Keywords: Camus, art, creation, absurd, rebellion, beauty, classicism

Albert Camus' comparatively short philosophical career (ranging from around 1942 until his death in 1960) saw his thought evolve quickly out of, and importantly away from the positions he developed in what remain his most popular works, the novel *The Outsider* and the shorter philosophical work, *The Myth Of Sisyphus*. Yet the positions he developed in this first stage of his career, as he explicitly conceived it, are still often presented as definitive for understanding his thought. This includes considerations of Camus' writings on art, or aesthetic matters, broadly conceived.¹ By contrast, this paper will contend that at different times Camus works with and between at least four philosophies of art, from his earliest texts through to those he wrote just before his premature death in January 1960. These philosophies of art are informed by, and themselves inform, meta-philosophical reflections on the nature and limits of philosophy. Finally, from beginning to end, Camus' philosophical reflections on art are closely interwoven, and at times almost indistinguishable from his ongoing reflections on "the life of the artist": that is, on being an artist as a choice or form of life, demanding a kind of ascetic discipline which, at other times in Western history, has been associated with the life of the philosopher.

The paper begins (Part 1) by reexamining Camus' relationship to existentialism, a philosophical movement with which he was associated in his own lifetime, but which he in his own lifetime tried to distance himself from. Once Camus' critique of existentialism, and his deeply Hellenistic or neoclassical orientation after 1942 is clarified, it becomes possible (Part 2) to examine Camus' four intersecting, developing conceptions of art: i. as descriptive, "absurd" discipline in a post-metaphysical world; ii. as neoclassical practice; iii. as a work of "correcting creation" and, as such, a model for post-metaphysical revolt more widely; and iv. as a form of witnessing or *témoignage*. Whilst outside of scholarly journals, there has been some recognition of Camus' final conception of art as bearing witness in a world of competing totalizing ideologies², we propose that this article as the first to present synoptically Camus' complex view on art and the responsibility of artists, as his thought developed from the 1930s to the time of his death in early 1960.³

1. Camus and existentialism

“No, I am not an existentialist,” Camus commented several times in his life.⁴ The denials have not been very effective, as he was already lamenting in the essay “The Enigma”. “The modern mania for identifying an author with his subject matter does not allow him to enjoy [any] relative liberty,” Camus reflects there. “Thus, one becomes a prophet of the absurd. Yet what did I do except reason about an idea which I found in the streets of my time?”⁵ It is of course exactly Camus’ philosophical stance of taking his beginnings from the ideas, concerns and crises of his time that places him in lasting proximity to the existentialism of Sartre and other contemporaries. The first such problem, in the interwar years, was that of the absurd. After the death of God, after the global catastrophe of the Great War with its industrialised slaughter, could life have a meaning? And, if no Absolute and Absolving meaning could be found, in the wake of modern science and a Socratic awareness of the limits of the human mind, was life worth living? Was suicide not the more rational response to a despair at the unavailability or unsatisfactory nature of the traditional, religious and metaphysical frameworks?

The proximities are clear to dimensions of Sartre’s thought, and its urgent staging as a response to problems ordinary men and women could experience. Yet, the idea of “absurdity” does not loom large in *Being and Nothingness*, and when Sartre evokes the “universal contingency of being”, it is associated with the unavoidable need of the “for-itself” to choose, even if that choice is to suicide.⁶ For Camus, absurdity involves the contrast between the inalienable human longing for some unifying explanation for all of life (and death), and the limits of our capacities to satisfy that longing.⁷ To affirm that all is contingency, as Sartre does, is for Camus already arguably a metaphysical “leap”.⁸ The point is we can’t know for sure that everything is the product (say) of chance and atoms, whilst our very longing to know this is not for us contingent.

Camus’ major reference in *Myth of Sisyphus*, when he talks of existentialism, is however Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s dialectical unravellings of the limits of human understanding Camus greatly admires. Yet, he notes, Kierkegaard then leaps from showing these limits, to deifying the very irrationality of the world as it presents itself. *Credo quia absurdum*, “I believe because it is absurd.” Camus thinks this, too, is a leap of “philosophical suicide”—that we cannot know the Meaning of the Whole does not mean our lives have no meanings, or that their only meaning could come from trying to lay aside the critical or inquiring mind. This is why Camus tells us in interview that the *Myth of Sisyphus* was directed “against so-called existentialist philosophers.”⁹

That Kierkegaard is a Christian thinker, whose impulses here echo those we can find in a Church father like Tertullian, is for Camus also highly significant. In a 1950 interview, Camus specified that it was a mistake to treat existentialism with levity, as if it might be a passing fad. It was in his eyes a very serious form of philosophical research whose origins reach back to Saint Augustine.¹⁰ Contemporary interviews and notes provide further insight. Camus’ claim increasingly became that existentialism’s stress on the metaphysical homelessness of modern man, the abyssal openness of radical freedom, and (therefore) the impossibility of happiness represents a secularization of Christian thought. The *Temps modernes* intellectuals, Camus writes with unwonted bitterness around the time of his fallout with Sartre, “admit sin and refuse grace.”¹¹ They are like “Jansenists without God”, he comments, “by restoring universal sin without the compensation of grace, and an excess of penitence without charity ...”¹² This is of course exactly the uncanny profile of the “judge-penitent”, Jean-Baptiste Clamence in 1956’s *The Fall*, another notably Christian title—someone who claims a right to judge others without mercy, since he has publicly proclaimed his own guilt to all who will listen.

This is why Camus will increasingly proclaim his own philosophy and art as a form of neoclassicism, owing primary allegiance to classical Greek, not Christian sources. “I am not an existentialist, although of course critics are obliged to make categories,” Camus hence would specify: “I got my first philosophical impressions from the Greeks, not from nineteenth century Germany.”¹³

Obviously, the full dimensions of Camus' conception of Greek thought, and of his selective uptake of elements of this civilizational legacy, are far beyond the scope of this presentation.¹⁴ What unites his earlier thought in *The Myth of Sisyphus* with his later, more open appeal to Greek thought in essays such as "Helen's Exile" and *The Rebel*, is an emphasis on "limits": the limits of human knowledge, of human capacity, of human control.¹⁵ This, he sees in different places in preSocratic thought, tragic theatre, as well as Socratic philosophy, in contrast to the unmeasured claims of theologians and modern ideologists, who lay claim to totalizing explanations of history, the world, and the human condition. To rebel in Camus is not to embrace the unlimited, as Bataille and Blanchot supposed.¹⁶ It is to say "no" to a force or power perceived as unjust. But *in doing so*, it is the affirmation of a limit, a "thus far, and no farther."¹⁷ For Camus, rebellion is hence not a nihilistic force. It reflects an innate human desire for unity and for justice. Uniting moderns with ancients, it also intimates the reality of a larger order in which human dignity might find a finite and relative, but nonetheless real place which modern totalitarian ideologies, enamored of total understanding and control, work to destroy:

A fragment attributed to...[the preSocratic philosopher] Heraclitus states simply "Presumption, regression of progress." And centuries after the Ephesian, Socrates, threatened by the death penalty, granted himself no other superiority than this: he did not presume to know what he did not know. The most exemplary life and thought of these centuries ends in a proud avowal of ignorance. In forgetting this, we have forgotten our virility...¹⁸

With this much in place concerning Camus' general philosophical orientation relative to existentialism, as he read it, we are ready to turn to Camus' conceptions (plural) of literature, and its relationships to philosophy and rebellion, this central motif of his more mature thought.

2. Creation corrected: Camus's four conceptions of the role of art

Camus' *oeuvre*, which spans philosophical essays, lyrical essays, plays, novels, novellas, short stories, and notebooks, is itself a living testimony to what *The Myth of Sisyphus* attests. Camus felt, especially as a young man, that the ancient division between philosophy and poetry was far from absolute.¹⁹ On one side, novels involve a high degree of intellectual work. Many contain extended reflections and developments on philosophical themes: in Camus' case, one thinks especially of *The Plague* and differently *The Fall*. On the other side, Camus follows Nietzsche in seeing an expressive dimension to philosophical creations, so they can in one register be read as "confessions" of the preoccupations and attitude to life of their creators.²⁰ The modern situation, with the unavailability of systematic metaphysical solutions, also speaks for Camus to a closing of the gap between any philosophical system and its author:

Today when thought has ceased to lay claim to the universal, when its best history would be that of its repentances, we know that the system, when it is worthwhile, cannot be separated from its author.²¹

This does not however mean that Camus ever completely identifies philosophy and literature. It is important to write novels, an early note reads, since "people think in images."²² If you want to be read widely, as a philosopher, you need then in Camus' view to write fiction. Moreover, to the extent that (as I believe is undeniable) Camus consistently identified himself above all as an artist, I think it is plausible to maintain that he felt that literature could do more and different things than reasoned philosophical writing and reflection alone.

As we've anticipated in the opening, there are different axes of Camus' philosophical and critical reflections on literature, which he often interlaces. Philosophical thought, which works with and takes aim at the universal, is thereby limited in its ability to explore the particular elements of existence. But we each of us are particular beings, in particular circumstances, and to tell our stories or analyze our particularity, different ways of thinking are needed. The millions dead in World War 2 and its labor and death camps, for example, is a statistic; but Camus' account of the particular fate of his friend René Leynaud in his Preface to Leynaud's *Poésies posthumes* gives a human face or "flesh" (the title given the piece in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*) to these bloodless abstractions:

We know the names of only eleven of them. Between five and six a.m., Leynaud and 18 of his fellow prisoners were gathered together in the courtyard. They were served coffee and then handcuffed. One by one, they climbed into a truck which took them to the Gestapo Headquarters in Place Bellecour. They waited three quarters of an hour in the cellar of that building. When they were finally called, their handcuffs were removed and they were made to climb into a truck again with some German soldiers armed with machine guns. The truck drove out of Lyons in the direction of Villeneuve. At 11 a.m. it crept through Villeneuve and encountered a group of children returning from a walk. The prisoners and the children looked at each other for a time but didn't exchange a word. Just beyond Villeneuve, opposite a grove of poplars, the truck stopped, the soldiers lead to the ground and commanded the men to get out and go towards the woods. A first group of six left the truck and started towards the trees. The machine guns immediately crackled behind them and mowed them down. A second group followed, then a third. Those who were still breathing were put out of their misery by a final shot. One of them, however, although frightfully wounded, managed to drag himself to a peasant's house. From him we learned the details.²³

It is true that 18 resistance fighters were killed by the German Nazi occupying power. It is valid and important to analyse the history of which this event is one small part. It is likewise essential to understand rationally the mechanisms of terror of which this mass execution is one example, not least if we hope not to see these mechanisms once more operating to mow people down at the edges of other forests. But to recount the particular details, at once dispassionately and with the determined passion of a comrade in the struggle against fascism affects us quite differently. A literary description can do this, a philosophical text (as philosophical) cannot.

Literature, which is woven out of the particulars of lives, experiences, dilemmas, and choices can hence as it were take philosophy "off road", and out of the empyrean of universals into the particular realm where human beings strive, long, act and suffer.²⁴ With this much said at a rather general level about Camus' attitude towards literature, it is nevertheless I think possible and fruitful to analytically divide four different, intersecting conceptions of literature which come in and out of prominence in the course of Camus' works.

i. Art and the absurd, description, not explanation

The account of art which we find in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, sharing in the popularity of the whole work, is often identified with Camus' stance on art and literature per se.²⁵ This would of course be an error, even if Camus had not so clearly criticized, if not wholly repudiated this earlier work. On the other hand, even in *Myth*, Camus specifies that he is not interested in a general aesthetics, or even all kinds of art, but how art and artistic creation can appear in the light of the thought of the absurd that he is developing:

among all the thoughts that start from the absurd, I have seen that very few remain within it. And through their deviations or infidelities I have best been able to measure what belonged to the absurd. Similarly, I must wonder: is an absurd work of art possible?²⁶

True, the interpretive situation is complicated, since the absurd for Camus also implicates his view of the larger human condition at this time. Nevertheless, the forms of art Camus hones in on in *The Myth* are selected for their very specific features: not all kinds of art are treated. Given that the absurd implicates the confrontation between the human desire to find, and temptation to falsely claim unifying explanations of our experiences, and the ways that the world resists satisfying this desire:

I should like to speak here of a work [literature and the novel] in which the temptation to explain remains greatest, in which illusion offers itself automatically, in which conclusion is almost inevitable. I mean fictional creation. I propose to inquire whether or not the absurd can hold its own there.²⁷

I don't think Camus is denying here that literature can for example be consoling or that, for instance in morality plays, it can preach and illustrate edifying lessons. He is however claiming, as he will throughout his life, that these forms of literature are not absurd creation. He also supposes them to be

less telling for modern Westerners, and perhaps modern people now globally, given our post-theological, post-metaphysical, and increasingly post-traditional *denouement*.

What then makes a work of art “absurd”, or more adequate to and informative about the absurd condition? Here, exactly, it is the way that the work of art creates a world, but declines to absolutely explain or justify it, just as (we note) the modern sciences “decline to hypothesise” concerning the essential meanings of what they discover, as Isaac Newton immortally put it:

Describing—that is the last ambition of an absurd thought. Science likewise, having reached the end of its paradoxes, ceases to propound and stops to contemplate and sketch the ever virgin landscape of phenomena. The heart learns thus that the emotion delighting us when we see the world’s aspects comes to us not from its depth but from their diversity. Explanation is useless, but the sensation remains and, with it, the constant attractions of a universe inexhaustible in quantity. The place of the work of art can be understood at this point.²⁸

There where one cannot explain everything, one can attentively describe many things. It is “not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing.”²⁹ And this very effort demands a subjective or even ethical discipline, keeping one’s own desire for ‘closure’ at bay, as we say, in the face of the richness and ambiguity of the world. This is why the account of absurd art in *Myth* is also a celebration of the form of life of the artist, as an ethical exemplar:

The effort to dominate is considerable here. But human intelligence is up to much more. . . . 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*.³⁰

These two registers of absurd art as descriptive of the particular, without leaping to explanatory universals, and as such, as a kind of ethical ascesis, will remain with Camus throughout his works. They are however each developed and inflected in different directions as Camus’ life and thought develops, in ways I hope to make clear for you now.

ii. Camus’ neoclassicism, or intelligence at the scaffold

The already-mentioned success of *The Myth of Sisyphus* has drawn popular attention away from a really vital piece of contemporary critical reflection by Camus, on artistic creation. The piece in “Intelligence and the Scaffold”, which has been translated in English in the *Literary and Critical Essays*.³¹ This article by itself shows the caution we need to exercise before identifying even the younger Camus’ views on art per se, with the claims concerning art and absurdity in *Myth of Sisyphus*. Straight away, the piece opens up a wider purview on Camus as an artist, and his own sense of the legacy which he inherits, identifying what he calls “a certain classical tradition in the French novel.”³² The representatives of this tradition include Madame de Lafayette, Stendhal, and Proust. What are its features? The word “absurd” does not appear in the entire article. The language here instead focuses on an “ideal of simplicity”, “an Apollonian perfection of form” in which everything is “reduced to its essentials.”³³

Camus’ essay hence begins, and takes its title, from the episode in which Louis XIV’s executioner was allegedly asked by the dethroned monarch to deliver a letter, on his way to the scaffold. The man responds, with an economy which Camus finds exemplary: “I am not here to run your errands but to lead you to the scaffold.”³⁴

So, here we have an apparent contradiction with the ideal of description in *Myth*. At least, one might take that to license an attempt to speak as copiously as possible about the wealth of experience which one cannot explain. But, as readers of Camus will know, he is almost always (*The Fall* and “The Renegade” excepted) much closer to a Laconic, than a prolix style. One thinks especially of *The Outsider*: “Today, mother/mummy (*maman*) is dead. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure. The telegram from the Home says: ‘Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy,’

which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday.”³⁵ But it is possible to argue that what resonates most loudly even in the beautiful, meditative descriptions of the somnolent town of Oran, at different stages of its pandemic in *The Plague*, is a heavy silence, one which expresses the absence of any final metaphysical justification for the town’s afflictions.³⁶

Camus describes the classicism of the great French novelists of his concern as “romanticism brought under control.”³⁷ Dispassion here is not a matter of any lack of passion, that is to say. On the contrary, “a great part of the genius of the French novel lies in the effort to give the order of pure language to the cries of pure passion.”³⁸ It is a matter of a “stubborn art” whose entire efficacy lies in the authors’ “intelligence and attempt to dominate” the medium of language.³⁹ I think we can go farther, in fact, and say that for Camus, not simply passion but the larger realities of the human condition are best conveyed less through their direct and full disclosure or expression, at least in litterateurs’ works, than in a crafted play between what is and is not said: “the liveliest frame crackles in their rigorous language.”⁴⁰ There is a certain *pudeur* here, as well as a respect for the reader’s capacities to fill in the blanks for themselves, through the activation of sympathetic imagination.

Camus is also influenced in this stylistic matter, without doubt, by his early and continuing familiarity with classical Greek poetry, history, and philosophy. We cannot adequately treat here the role, for example, of the classical myths in Camus’ works: of Sisyphus in the earlier works, but also of Prometheus in the period of *The Rebel*, of Helen as symbol of natural beauty, of the fall, and of Nemesis in his final works.⁴¹ It is possible only to say in our immediate connection that Camus saw in such mythical figures and their stories powerfully concentrated condensations of common human experiences which can in one sense never be exhausted: of absurdity, of rebellion, of beauty, of exile, and of the need for order and balance. For the same reason, their evocation can speak to new generations. Camus would thus once describe himself as an artist who wished to create new myths which could speak to “the measure of his passion and of his anguish.”⁴²

Let me note finally under this heading that all this is not to say, as anyone who has read Camus’ lyrical essays or the final section of *The Rebel* will be able to attest, that at specific moments Camus is not able to express himself in the most colored language, rhythmical periods and rhetorical climaxes. It is however to say that the power of these moments in Camus, as it were, stand out the more against the background of a classical austerity or limpidity Camus also valued in other writers.

iii. *Creation corrected, or art and rebellion*

It is a fact too little reflected upon that Part IV of *The Rebel*, at the culmination of his long historical analyses of the genealogy and realities of Nazi and Stalinist terror, is devoted to “rebellion and art.”⁴³ The reasons for this are two-fold. First, the way that different political regimes and philosophical visionaries from Plato onwards have treated the arts for Camus is its own, revelatory field to continue his analysis of the realities and consequences of human rebellion and revolution. Why do closed political regimes come first after the artists? Why would someone who could write like Plato nevertheless feel that his ideal city should expel at least some of the poets?⁴⁴ Why has 20th century history made of Plato’s expulsion not an extreme, but a mild measure, compared to the imprisonment, enslavement or elimination of artists under the totalitarian states? What happens when the sense of justice that could make a revolutionary profess to care more for a shoemaker than Shakespeare turns “poeticidal”?⁴⁵ Can a justice which is without beauty remain truly just? We will return to these considerations, vital for Camus, when we look at the fourth idea of art and literature in his work.

Secondly, as Camus begins this Part of *The Rebel*, he wants to argue that the same demand for unity which animates political and metaphysical rebellion, outraged at the damaged and incomplete aspects of human experience, is also at play in artistic creation. Artistic creation, in this sense, is itself a form of rebellion against the world as it is, without nevertheless nihilistically denying that world:

Art is the activity that exalts and denies simultaneously. “No artist tolerates reality,” says Nietzsche. That is true, but no artist can get along without reality. Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a

rejection of the world. But it rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is. Rebellion can [hence] be observed here in its pure state and in its original complexities.⁴⁶

Artworks, Camus agrees with other authorities, project their own worlds. Yet, the creation and enjoyment of art is not escapist, as certain fascist and socialist critics had maintained—relative to the serious business of racial, imperial, or class struggle and war. Happy people also read novels, and there is no evidence that people who are miserable in this world consume art more voraciously.⁴⁷ Indeed, Camus argues that forms of modernist art which deliberately turn against representation, to undertake formal experiments, may be revelatory in different ways, but they are not great art.⁴⁸ For the worlds that great artworks project, for Camus, are nevertheless familiar to us⁴⁹—even for instance the high fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien hence draws from, adapts, and restages ideas, character types and ideals we can experience in this world, and in its histories.

The highest forms of art, Camus instead argues in *The Rebel*, must occupy the fragile, fertile middle ground between formalistic withdrawal and political co-optation. All artistic creation as he sees it involves a rebellion, or what in post-Hegelian language Camus calls a “negation.”⁵⁰ Even the most realistic of novels, like photographs, necessarily select some elements of reality to present and exclude others; just as all music works by isolating and arranging sounds in sequences and combination which are never found in nature, etc.⁵¹ Nevertheless, at work in such artistic negation by itself is not any idealistic desire to evade reality, but a form of that human longing for unity with the world that Camus sees as a baseline, anthropological constant. “Far from wanting always to forget, [people] suffer on the contrary from never possessing life fully enough, estranged citizens of the world, exiles in their own homelands,” he claims:

Except for vivid moments of fulfilment, all reality for them is incomplete. Their actions escape them in the form of other actions, return in unexpected guises to judge them, and disappear like the water Tantalus longed to drink, into some still undiscovered source. To know the whereabouts of the source, to control the course of the river, to understand life, at last, as destiny—these are their true aspirations ...⁵²

All genuine art for Camus speaks from and to these “true aspirations”. In a thought which Camus is present as early as his youthful essay “Art in Communion”, genuine creation works by selecting particular elements from the transient fabrics of experience, as if by an almost-photographic “pause”.⁵³ These elements, which might otherwise not be glimpsed at all—for *who, after all, noticed the hands of the executioner during Christ’s flagellation which the painter vividly portrays?*, as Camus asks⁵⁴—having been singled out from their passing contexts, are then re-presented in new, aesthetically pleasing unities. In this new artistic form, moreover, these privileged particulars, like mythical characters, are made to condense and stand proxy for more universal dimensions of human experience which audiences’ contemplation of the work can recognise. That is a complex thought, so let’s see if Camus does not say it more clearly:

The greatest and the most ambitious of all the arts, sculpture, is involved in fixing the three dimensions of the fleeting figure of man, and on restoring the unity of great style to the general disorder of gestures. Sculpture does not reject resemblance, of which, indeed, it has need. But resemblance is not its first aim. What it is looking for, in its periods of greatness, is the gesture, the expression, or the empty stare which will sum up all the gestures and all the stares in the world. Its purpose is not to imitate, but to stylize and to imprison in one significant expression the fleeting ecstasy of the body or the infinite variety of human attitudes. Then, and only then, does it erect, on the pediments of teeming cities, the model, the type, the motionless perfection that will cool, for one moment, the fevered brow of man ...⁵⁵

This third model of art, we thus see—one which Camus will still develop in “Create Dangerously”, alongside the fourth model (see below)—brings together the descriptive attentiveness of the absurd creator, with the selective *pudeur* of the classical mode of “Intelligence and the Scaffold.” The great work of art does not exalt our imperfect world, nor deny our unjust world, but involves “a revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world”.⁵⁶ It presents us with alternative possible worlds, forms of “creation corrected” or perhaps epitomised, as Camus writes in his *Carnets* in the

period surrounding the *Rebel*.⁵⁷ “Nietzsche rejected all transcendence, moral or divine, in saying that all such transcendence tended to calumniate this world and this life,” Camus comments: “But perhaps there is a living transcendence, of which beauty is the promise, which can make us love and prefer this mortal world to all others.”⁵⁸ And it is by producing images of such living transcendence, so many “new world[s] different from the everyday world and yet the same, particular and yet universal, full of innocent insecurity—called forth by the power and longing of a creative mind . . .”⁵⁹, that artistic creation serves an irreplaceable function which Camus charges that we can turn our backs upon only by diminishing our humanity.

It is thus in this third model that Camus is able to preserve and present one of the most abiding features of his lifework; again, like the ancient Greeks as he asks us to envisage them, Camus was enamoured of beauty. However, in this political work, *The Rebel*, it is beauty’s relationship with the longing for justice, and as a potential check upon the human propensity to absolutise this political value, which is paramount.⁶⁰ In “Return to Tipasa”, a contemporary essay in which Camus returns to the ancient Roman ruins that had deeply inspired him in his youth, but which are now surrounded by a barbed wire fence, the *ancient combatant* of the resistance press will nevertheless reflect that:

Forsaking beauty and the sensual happiness attached to it, exclusively serving misfortune, calls for a nobility I lack. After all, nothing is true that forces one to exclude. Beauty alone ends in grimaces; justice alone in oppression. Whoever aims to serve one exclusive of the other serves no one, not even himself, and in the end is doubly the servant of injustice ...⁶¹

iv. The artist as witness

What I am calling the fourth model of literature and artistic creation in Camus becomes prominent in Camus’ theoretical reflections of the period after *The Rebel*, at the same time as it looks back in his literary career to his first collection of short stories, “The Wrong Side and the Right Side”.⁶² Its preeminent theoretical developments are to be found in Camus’ Nobel Prize “Banquet Speech” in 1957⁶³, although it also surfaces alongside the second and third models in the contemporary address, “Create Dangerously”, which is translated in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*.⁶⁴ This ‘model’, like the others, does not contradict Camus’ other developments, but stands in fruitful tension with them. It nevertheless pushes in a different, more single-mindedly intersubjective or ethico-political direction than the absurd creation, classicism, or ‘creation corrected’ paradigms. So, what is it?

In their heated exchange following Francois Jeanson’s attack on *The Rebel* in the pages of Sartre’s magazine, *Le temps modernes*, Sartre had bitterly mocked that Camus wrote as if he thought “that poverty [itself had] sought you out and said: ‘Go and speak in my name’”.⁶⁵ Like so much else in that *triste* exchange and break-up of a friendship, as Paul Audi has shown in an excellent book, this charge struck at the quick of Camus’ identity.⁶⁶ Raised poor, amongst an illiterate *pied noir* family, in a French Algeria increasingly breaking apart, Camus’ first stories are tender reconstructions of the ordinary sadnesses and joys of the people amidst whom he was raised. What became his final, incomplete novel, *The First Man*, Camus explicitly intended as a more mature, denser artistic exploration of many of the same subjects as his first book, a regenerative return to his beginnings in the guise of a virtual autobiography, and an attempt again to bear witness to these people whom history was soon to condemn.⁶⁷ The fourth model of literary creation in Camus is that of *témoignage*, testimony.

So, prompted by the extraordinary recognition involved in receiving the Nobel Prize at just 43, Camus responded by explaining his sense of his calling in these terms.

For myself, I cannot live without my art. But I have never placed it above everything. If, on the other hand, I need it, it is because it cannot be separated from my fellow men, and it allows me to live, such as I am, on one level with them. It is a means of stirring the greatest number of people by offering them a privileged picture of common joys and sufferings. It obliges the artist not to keep himself apart; it subjects him to the most humble and the most universal truth. And often he who has chosen the fate of the artist because he felt himself to be different soon realizes that he can maintain neither his art nor

his difference unless he admits that he is like the others. The artist forges himself to the others, midway between the beauty he cannot do without and the community he cannot tear himself away from. That is why true artists scorn nothing; they are obliged to understand rather than to judge.⁶⁸

We see in the last quoted sentence the perdurance of the first model, even here, amongst Camus' most 'solidary' formulations, if that is the word, concerning the vocation of the artist. The true artist, Camus will now uphold, aims at the ideal of universal communication⁶⁹: this is arguably what his collection *Exile and the Kingdom* means by "kingdom" (*royaume*), a kind of universal communion between peoples, rather than any political or imperial reality.⁷⁰ If such an ideal remains impossible at present, "he appeals to a more far-reaching dialogue with generations to come."⁷¹ But, this means that the artist can have no truck with political forces which sanction lying and murder, since these attack this ideal and do violence to the very possibility of such dialogue. So, Camus' "Banquet Speech" continues:

By the same token, the writer's role is not free from difficult duties. By definition he cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it. Otherwise, he will be alone and deprived of his art. Not all the armies of tyranny with their millions of men will free him from his isolation, even and particularly if he falls into step with them. But the silence of an unknown prisoner, abandoned to humiliations at the other end of the world, is enough to draw the writer out of his exile, at least whenever, in the midst of the privileges of freedom, he manages not to forget that silence, and to transmit it in order to make it resound by means of his art . . . Because his task is to unite the greatest possible number of people, his art must not compromise with lies and servitude which, wherever they rule, breed solitude. Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression.⁷²

In this perspective, Camus' earlier artistic values are reconfigured, and given a more openly political valence. "The aim of art is not to legislate or to reign supreme", "Create Dangerously" thus specifies, "but rather to understand first"⁷³: this is, again, the first model. But, then he continues: "no work of genius has been based on hatred or contempt. This is why the artist, at the end of his slow advance, absolves instead of condemning"⁷⁴, and what is at stake is clearly other people, above all.

In many moments in this Nobel Prize Speech and also "Create Dangerously", in fact, those interested can at once hear Camus' debts to Nietzsche's work, and his reorientation of the latter's aristocratic radicalism.⁷⁵ The "rebirth" of culture to which Camus, in his last years, pledged himself, took aim at "bringing forth many anti-Alexanders to tie together the Gordian knot of civilization cut by the sword."⁷⁶ Art, by virtue of what Camus now calls its "free essence", "unites where tyranny separates. . ."⁷⁷ He explains as follows:

Every great work makes the human face more admirable and richer, and this is its whole secret. And thousands of concentration camps and barred cells are not enough to hide this staggering testimony of dignity. This is why it is not true that culture can be, even temporarily, suspended in order to make way for a new culture. Man's unbroken testimony as to his suffering and his nobility cannot be suspended, any more than the act of breathing can be suspended . . . Yes, when modern tyranny shows that, even when confined to his calling, the artist is a public enemy, it is right. But in this way tyranny pays its respects, through the artist, to an image of man nothing has ever been able to crush.⁷⁸

Concluding remarks

With these remarks, we have come to the end of the itinerary of this paper. We started by trying to clarify Camus' complex relationship with existentialism, culminating in his criticism of the former as a form of secularised Christianity without grace, and identification with the Greek legacy as he (selectively) understood it. We then, in the major contribution of the paper, examined Camus' too-rarely-examined philosophical and critical reflections on art, and the life and calling of the artist across the entire span of his working life. Too often, the paper has tried to show, we remain capti-

vated by the admittedly-captivating drama of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and its model of absurd creation, forgetting that Camus very soon afterwards renounced this individualistic text, compelled—as he felt himself—by the spread of Nazism after 1940 to engage politically in the European struggles, and intellectually in the attempt to understand and overcome the kinds of nihilism he saw playing out. If we are to understand Camus' developing, multi-dimensional understanding of philosophy and literature, we argued, we need to work with not one, but four 'models': that of absurd creation from *Myth*, classicism, "creation corrected," and finally this fourth model of witnessing or testimony.

Each of these models can be treated by itself. But it is clear that Camus himself believed them in the late 1950s to be consistent, albeit that the emphasis on absurdity drops out from his work as we proceed. The great artist can speak to others (fourth model), Camus writes, only by speaking "of what all know and of the reality common to us all [first and second model]. The sea, rains, necessity, desire, the struggle against death [first model]—these are the things that unite us all."⁹ The process of "creation corrected," imagining and shaping alternative worlds which draw and reshape particulars from our world and charging them with universal significance (third model), is the medium through which this communication is possible.

Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

Notes

- ¹ See for example Thomas Pözlner, "Camus on the Value of Art", *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 365–376; Guy Bennett-Hunter, "Absurd Creation: An Existentialist View of Art?", *Philosophical Frontiers* 4, Issue 1 (2009): 47–56; Mark A. Hawkins, "Albert Camus, Ernest Becker, and the Art of Living in Existential Paradox", *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, online first, May 18, 2019.
- ² See Maria Popova, "Create Dangerously: Albert Camus on the Artist as a Voice of Resistance and an Instrument of Freedom", *The Marginalian*, 2018; and Clint Margrave, "Create Dangerously: Albert Camus and the Power and Responsibility of the Artist", *Quillette* (quillette.com), 12 Dec 2019.
- ³ Cf. Robert Leal, "Albert Camus and the Significance of Art", *Australian Journal of French Studies* 3 (1966), 66–78, which recognizes the evolution of Camus' views, and will be cited as we proceed.
- ⁴ Albert Camus, "Three Interviews" ("No, I am not an existentialist"), in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, edited by Phillip Thody, translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy (Vintage: New York, 1987), 345. "...the only book of ideas that I have ever published, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, was directed against the so-called existentialist philosophers..."
- ⁵ Albert Camus, "The Enigma", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 159.
- ⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes (Washington: Washington Square Press, 1993).
- ⁷ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991), 29.
- ⁸ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 6, 33–41.
- ⁹ Albert Camus, "Three Interviews", 345.
- ¹⁰ Camus' *Notebooks* in the 1950s, the time of his falling out over political subjects with Jean-Paul Sartre and others, are especially significant. "The Greeks would have understood nothing of existentialism — when, despite the scandal, they were able to enter into Christianity. It is that existentialism does not imply [any mode of] conduct." Albert Camus, *Carnets II, janvier 1942–mars 1951* (Paris: Les Éditions Gallimard, 1964). 116.
- ¹¹ Albert Camus, *Carnets III: mars 1951–décembre 1959* (Paris: Les Éditions Gallimard, 1989). 62.
- ¹² Albert Camus, "Defence of *The Rebel*", in *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation*, 217: "nor, on the contrary, like others—Jansenists without God—by restoring universal sin without the compensation of grace, and in an excess of penitence without charity, mortifying themselves by adhering to that which denies them..."

- ¹³ At Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, translated by B. Ivry (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2000), 379.
- ¹⁴ For two recent works in English on this theme, see Ronald Srigley, *Camus' Critique of Modernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011) & Matthew Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophie: To Return to Our Beginnings* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).
- ¹⁵ See Albert Camus, "Helen's Exile", 148–149; Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, revised and complete translation by Anthony Bower, with a Foreword by Sir Herbert Read (New York: Vintage, 1956), 296–301; "On the Future of Tragedy", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 288–294.
- ¹⁶ Georg Bataille, "Le Temps de Révolte", reproduced at www-site http://www.pileface.com/sollers/article.php?id_article=938, last accessed January 2021. On Maurice Blanchot's critique of Camus, see Jonathan Degenève, "'Quelle absence!': Blanchot lecteur de Camus," at http://www.blanchot.fr/fr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=134&Itemid=41, last accessed January 2021.
- ¹⁷ Camus, *Rebel*, 13.
- ¹⁸ Camus, "Helen's Exile", 149–150.
- ¹⁹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 93–104; cf. John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 14.
- ²⁰ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 100.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Camus, *Carnets I, mai 1935–février 1942* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 23. See Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi's invaluable, "Si tu veux être philosophe..." *Albert Camus et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 21–34.
- ²³ Albert Camus, "The Flesh", *Resistance, Rebellion, & Death*, 46–47.
- ²⁴ On the importance of the particulars in moral experience and writing, see Albert Camus, "Introduction aux *Maximes et anecdotes de Chamfort*", in *Oeuvres Complètes I 1944–1948* (Gallimard Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: 2006), 923–932.
- ²⁵ See notes 1–3 above.
- ²⁶ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 96.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 94–95.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ³¹ Albert Camus, "Intelligence and the Scaffold", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 210–218.
- ³² Camus, "Intelligence and the Scaffold", 210.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 211, 213.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.
- ³⁵ Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (London: Penguin, 1963), 13.
- ³⁶ Albert Camus, *La Peste* (London: Methuen Educational Ltd., 1970), esp. 185–203.
- ³⁷ Camus, "Three Interviews", in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 353; see "Intelligence and the Scaffold", esp. 212–217.
- ³⁸ Camus, "Intelligence and the Scaffold", 212.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.
- ⁴¹ On Camus' use of myth, see esp. Monique Crochet, *Les Mythes dans L'Oeuvre d'Albert Camus* (Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1973)
- ⁴² Camus at Arthur Scherr, "Marie Cardona: An Ambivalent Nature-Symbol in Albert Camus's *L'étranger*," *Orbis Litterarum* 66, no. 1 (2011): 12.
- ⁴³ Camus, *The Rebel*, 253–277.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.
- ⁴⁸ See Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously", in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1961), 269; *The Rebel*, 253.
- ⁴⁹ Camus, *Rebel*, 260–261, 264–265.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 256–57
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 256–257.

- ⁵² Ibid., *The Rebel*, 260.
- ⁵³ Albert Camus, *The First Camus: Youthful Writings*, trans. E. C. Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1977), 222–223.
- ⁵⁴ Camus, *The Rebel*, 257.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 256.
- ⁵⁶ Camus, “Create Dangerously”, 264.
- ⁵⁷ Albert Camus, *Carnets II, janvier 1942–mars 1951* (Paris: Les Éditions Gallimard, 1964), 201.
- ⁵⁸ Camus, *The Rebel*, 258.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., esp. 272–277.
- ⁶¹ Camus, “Return to Tipasa”, in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 165.
- ⁶² Albert Camus, “The Wrong Side and the Right Side”, in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 3–62.
- ⁶³ Albert Camus, “Banquet Speech”, *The Nobel Prize* [1957]. Online at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1957/camus/speech/>.
- ⁶⁴ Ie. Camus, “Create Dangerously”.
- ⁶⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Reply to Albert Camus”, in *Sartre and Camus: An Historic Confrontation*, 133.
- ⁶⁶ Paul Audi, *Qui Témoignera pour nous? Albert Camus face à lui-même* (Paris: Éditions Verdier, 2013).
- ⁶⁷ On Camus’ vision of Algeria, and the *pied noirs*, see Peter Dunwoodie, “Negotiation or Confrontation? Camus, Memory, and the Colonial Chronotype” in Christine Margerrison, Mark Orme, Lissa Lincoln eds., *A Reassessment of His Thinking at the Dawn of the New Millennium* (Amsterdam, New York: Editions Rodopi B. V., 2008), 47–60; David Carroll, “Camus’s Algeria: Birthrights, Colonial Injustice, and the Fiction of a French-Algerian People,” *MLN* 112, no. 4, French Issue (1997), 517–54; David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), esp. 4–7; Raylene Ramsay, “Colonial/Postcolonial Hybridity”, in *Albert Camus in the 21st Century*, esp. 76–77, 83–85.
- ⁶⁸ Camus, “Banquet Speech”.
- ⁶⁹ Camus’ defence of dialogue or a “théorie de la communication” *avant la lettre de Habermas et al*, see Albert Camus “Conférence au convent de Latour-Marbourg”, *Oeuvres Complètes II 1944–1948* (Gallimard Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: 2006), 509; and in the same volume, “Démocratie et modèstie” and “Dialogue pour le Dialogue”, 427f; 479f; “Le Témoin de la liberté”, esp. 490–491 (“*Il n’y a pas la vie sans dialogue*”); and “Le Dialogue et le Vocabulaire”, *Oeuvres Complètes III 1949–1956* (Gallimard Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: 2008., 1105–8; with *The Rebel*, esp. 283–291.
- ⁷⁰ Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*.
- ⁷¹ Camus, “Create Dangerously”, in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 258. See Camus, NVE 270, 273; “Banquet Speech”.
- ⁷² Camus, “Banquet Speech”.
- ⁷³ Camus, “Create Dangerously”, 266.
- ⁷⁴ Camus, “Create Dangerously”, 266.
- ⁷⁵ See Domenic Losurdo, *Nietzsche, Aristocratic Rebel*, trans. Gregor Benton (Leiden: Brill, 2020). For Camus’ criticisms of the political potentials of Nietzsche’s work, in relationship to European fascism, see *The Rebel*, 65–80.
- ⁷⁶ Camus, “Create Dangerously”, 269.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 269–70.
- ⁷⁹ Camus, “Create Dangerously”, 258.

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