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Albert Camus and the Virtue of the Literary Register

Grace Whistler

*Department of Philosophy
University of York*



Institute of Philosophy
Research Centre for the Humanities
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

About the author

Grace Whistler is a PhD candidate and philosophy seminar teacher at the University of York. Her thesis entitled *Camus as Moral Philosopher* reassesses the writings of Albert Camus in relation to current debates at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics. She began her academic career studying English Literature and Linguistics at the University of Greenwich in London, before undertaking an MA in Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. This diversity in her academic background informs the interdisciplinary approach she favours today, as her current research interests lie in questions of philosophical style and the phenomenological effects that texts have on us as readers.

Abstract

The ‘ancient quarrel’ between philosophy and literature originates from Plato’s *The Republic*, in which poetry is proscribed from the *polis*. This mistrust of literary and aesthetic language has been immensely influential throughout the history of philosophy, and in many ways it still informs opinions of what counts as ‘philosophy’. In this paper I argue that Camus’s oeuvre exemplifies a struggle to reconcile this ‘quarrel’, suggesting alternative ways of doing philosophy – writing philosophy, reading philosophy, and understanding philosophy.

With a view to demonstrating what I believe to be Camus’s own vision of the role of literature in regard to philosophy (that certain kinds of philosophical understanding are best achieved through encounters with fiction), I examine Camus’s personal struggles with the written word. I begin by suggesting that Camus’s stance in the quarrel is informed by his engagement with different modes of writing, arguing that his experiences as a journalist motivate his dissatisfaction with the efficacy of propositional truth claims – a feeling which is at the heart of both his philosophical and literary texts. I suggest that, for Camus, what cannot be effectively communicated via propositional claims (either in journalistic reports or philosophical arguments), is a comprehension of the subjective experiences of others, an important tool indeed for provoking philosophical reflection. I demonstrate his attempt to address this deficit, not only via an examination of the rhetorical devices and techniques he employs in his literary works, but also by analysing the more literary elements of his philosophical essays. I conclude that Camus’s exploration of the relation between philosophical ideas and their written representation could help to broaden our definitions of what constitutes a philosophical text and, in terms of ‘the quarrel’, should guarantee a place for poetry in the *polis*.

Albert Camus and the Virtue of the Literary Register

Introduction

The ancient quarrel between philosophy and literature originates from Plato's *The Republic*, in which poetry is proscribed from the *polis*.¹ This mistrust of literary and aesthetic language has been immensely influential throughout the history of philosophy. One writer whose oeuvre reveals quite a different attempt to reconcile the relationship between philosophy and literature is Albert Camus. For Camus, logic and reason are the deceptive tools which can be twisted to satisfy the purposes of the user, not rhetoric. He tells us that "philosophy [...] can be used for anything, even transferring murderers into judges".² Nobel Prize-winning author, playwright, existentialist philosopher, journalist and political essayist – the scope of his writing makes him somewhat difficult to categorise, but we can see already that Camus has something to bring to the quarrel. With a view to demonstrating what I believe to be Camus's own vision of the role of literature in regard to philosophy (that certain kinds of philosophical understanding are best achieved through encounters with fiction), this essay will explore Camus's personal struggles with the written word.

I will begin by demonstrating that Camus's approach is informed by his engagement with different modes of writing, arguing that his experiences as a journalist motivate his suspicion of linguistic convention (be that the truth claims of philosophical arguments or the clichés of headlines), a feeling which is at the heart of both his philosophical and literary texts. I will come to suggest that, for Camus, the conventional language of journalistic reports and philosophical arguments fail to achieve something important: a comprehension of the subjective experiences of others, which is an important tool for provoking philosophical reflection. I will then examine his attempt to address this deficit via an examination of his use of the literary register in his works, both fictional and philosophical. I conclude that Camus's endeavour to provoke philosophical reflection through literary form is in many ways a successful one which should, in terms of 'the quarrel', guarantee a place for poetry in the *polis*.

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¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee. London: Penguin, 2017, 335–353.

² Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. by Anthony Bowen, London: Penguin, 1971, 11.

1. Genre and Approach

In his early days as a writer, Camus gravitated toward journalism. He wrote for and edited several newspapers throughout his life (specifically the *Alger Républicain*, *Paris Soir*, and *Combat*), often favouring the exposition of social injustice, not only during the Nazi occupation of France, but also in defence of the oppressed Berber and Arabic communities of his native Algeria.³ Thus, Camus discovered first-hand the difficulties entailed in any attempt to communicate the experiences of others. In encountering the barriers of propaganda, and no less, the restrictive, clichéd language of the media, he was unconvinced of the ability of journalism to convey authentic messages. This dissatisfaction is illustrated from the perspective of Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*, in whom Camus is “present, barely disguised” according to leading biographer, Olivier Todd:⁴

every evening on the airwaves or in the press, pitying or admiring comments rained down on this solitary town; and every time, the doctor was irritated by the epic note or tone of a prize-giving address. Of course he knew that the concern was genuine, but it could only express itself in the conventional language in which men try to explain what unites them with the rest of humanity. Such language could not be applied to the little, daily efforts⁵

Here we can see how for Camus and Rieux alike, the language of the press lacks a certain resonance; torn between the difficulty entailed in trying to communicate “genuine” concern for individual suffering, and a reliance on truth claims which is the theoretical foundation of journalism, “the most authentic sufferings [are] habitually translated into the banal clichés of conversation”.⁶ As Camus once wrote in *Combat*, “[i]t may take a hundred issues of a newspaper to express a single idea”.⁷ For Camus, the kind of truth which is so difficult to express in journalism is philosophical, moral and existential, but how best to

³ Emmitt Parker, *Albert Camus: Artist in the Arena*, Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1966, 21.

⁴ Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. by Benjamin Ivry, London: Vintage, 1998, 133.

⁵ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. by Robin Buss, London: Penguin, 2001, 105–106.

⁶ Camus, *The Plague*, 60.

⁷ Albert Camus, *Between Hell and Reason: Essays from the Resistance Newspaper Combat. 1944–1947*, trans. by Alexandre de Gramont. Hannover: Wesleyan University Press, 1991, 61.

propagate this kind of reflection is something which Camus would continue to explore throughout his career.

Whilst widely considered one of the only two philosophical works he ever produced, *The Myth of Sisyphus* is heavily reliant on allegory and storytelling. *The Myth* is written chiefly in the first person, comprised of philosophical observations inspired by Camus's own experiences, but episodes based on his own story are minimal and brief. Instead, Camus draws extensively on literary references (including characters such as Don Juan, Don Quixote, King Lear, and of course, Sisyphus himself), references which bring to mind stories and characters so well-crafted and well-known that readers of this philosophical treatise are often transported to the original contexts of these characters, a space where aesthetic and empathetic appreciation take precedence. In making such a manoeuvre, Camus demonstrates the importance he bestows upon literature in regard to philosophy, but he makes it even clearer in telling us that

[t]he philosopher [...] is a creator. He has his characters, his symbols, and his secret action. He has his plot endings. [...]he best [novels] carry with them their universe. The novel has its logic, its reasonings, its intuition, and its postulates. It also has requirements of clarity. [...] The great novelists are philosophical novelists.⁸

So, according to Camus, not only is the philosopher a creator, any novelist worth his salt is also a philosopher. We might suggest that Camus himself demonstrates both of these claims in his own works, not only through the distinctive style of his philosophical texts, but also in his literary achievements. But Camus provides his own examples; these “great novelists” include the likes of Balzac, Sade, Melville, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Proust, Malraux and Kafka.⁹ But if both philosophy and the novel are creative works, what is the essential difference between the texts of novelists such as these and philosophical texts? And why is it that Camus chiefly endeavoured to communicate his thought through fiction? Camus explains:

the preference that they have shown for writing in images rather than in reasoned arguments is revelatory of a certain thought that is common to them all, convinced of the uselessness of any principle of

⁸ Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”, trans. by Justin O’Brien, in: *The Plague, The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom*. London: Everyman’s Library, 1955, 573–574.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 574.

explanation and sure of the educative message of perceptible appearance. They consider the work of art both as an end and as a beginning. It is the outcome of an often unexpressed philosophy, its illustration and its consummation. But it is complete only through the implications of that philosophy. It justifies at last that variant of an old theme that a little thought estranges from life whereas much thought reconciles to life¹⁰

This “educative message of perceptible appearance” is the kind of philosophical growth that Camus believes a novel can offer. The “unexpressed philosophy” of a novel is constituted by the ideas that (without necessarily being conscious of it) we are brought to reflect upon by the novel. For Camus, philosophical texts rely too wholly on “principle[s] of explanation” which “ estrange” us from life – such explanations are not conducive to the type of philosophical reflection Camus wants to achieve, a comprehension which “reconciles to life”.

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

[A literary text] enlists in us a trusting and loving activity. We read it suspending scepticism; we allow ourselves to be touched by the text... The attitude we have before a philosophical text can look, by contrast, retentive and unloving – asking for reason, questioning and scrutinising each claim, wresting clarity from the obscure. Before a literary work we are humble, open, active yet porous. Before a philosophical work we are active, controlling, aiming to leave no flank undefended and no mystery undisputed.¹¹

I suggest that Nussbaum’s stance in the quarrel is much like Camus’s. Just like her, he displays a dissatisfaction with regard to philosophical language and thought. Certainly, Camus uses fiction as a philosophical vehicle, but even in his explicitly philosophical essays, Camus relies on a more literary register to illustrate his arguments. Phrases such as “under a cruel sky”,¹² or “with knives in our hand and lumps in our throats”¹³ are powerful even isolated from his arguments, and they certainly do bring a kind of literariness to his

¹⁰ Ibid., 574.

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 282

¹² Camus, *The Rebel*, 79.

¹³ Ibid., 15.

philosophical form – as indeed the use of the myth of Sisyphus to illustrate absurdity and defiance is certainly an unusual philosophical device.

Camus's creative works also comment on the conflict between the human condition and rational language. A particularly crisp example of this is found in the words of his fellow journalist, Rambert, in *The Plague*, as he tries to justify his willingness to leave the quarantined city in order to be with his lover despite the risk of transmitting the infection to both her and the outside world: "'No,' Rambert said bitterly. 'You cannot understand. You are talking the language of reason; you are thinking in abstract terms'".¹⁴ This is more than just metaphilosophising, however, it is performative. In experiencing this character's plight for ourselves via the text, we are much more able to comprehend (and therefore sympathise with) his suffering, and consequently are more likely to forgive his impulsive selfishness. We too "want [...] with all [our] strength for Rambert to be back with his woman and for all those who loved one another to be reunited".¹⁴ Camus is both commenting on philosophical form and encouraging philosophical reflection. According to *The Republic*, our experience of reality is divorced from the *objective* truth, but precisely because art is "something at a third remove from the truth",¹⁵ it has the ability to communicate *subjective* realities other than our own, and it is therefore all the better for bringing about comprehension and empathy: a priority for Camus, despite the warning that Plato gives against such responses. We are told in *The Fall* that "[t]ruth, like light, blinds. Falsehood, on the contrary, is like a beautiful twilight that enhances every object".¹⁶ This beautiful twilight is the space in which our non-judgmental pre-reflection is most receptive to philosophical counsel, where we are most open to sharing the author's positing of a subjective reality and comprehending the other.

2. *Narrative and Distance*

The claim that Camus's novels are philosophical is a fairly uncontroversial one. His novels focus on and allude to a number of philosophical themes: not only the absurd, but also notions of guilt, innocence, suffering, compassion, mortality, freedom, and so on. What is of most interest to this paper, however, is how Camus uses the novel to encourage reflection on philosophical ideas. Camus attempts to achieve a comprehension of the subjective realities of

¹⁴ Camus, *The Plague*, 68.

¹⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, 345.

¹⁶ Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. by Justin O'Brien, London: Penguin, 1957.

others via narrative means – through encounters with the perspectives he creates, the reader is brought to reflect on philosophical issues. Examples of these attempts are too numerous to examine comprehensively, but it will be fruitful to look at several in order to give some depth to our understanding of his engagement with the quarrel. The following passage from *The Plague* (depicting a young boy in agony on his deathbed) is certainly an effective one:

The child was struggling with all his strength. From time to time Rieux would take his pulse (unnecessarily and rather to escape from the state of powerless inactivity in which he found himself); and when he closed his eyes he could feel this agitation mingled with the throbbing in his own veins. At such times he felt himself merge with the martyred child and tried to sustain him with all his still undiminished strength. But the beating of their two hearts, united for a minute, would cease to harmonize; the child escaped him and his efforts dissolved into nothingness. At this, he would put down the slender wrist and go back to his place.¹⁷

Camus chooses the image of the suffering of an innocent child to illustrate the injustice and absurdity of life. The use of the word “martyred” to describe the child leads us to reflect on the notion of a meaningful death, and in the godless world of *The Plague*, we are made aware of just how needless and unjustifiable this child’s suffering really is. Rieux’s empathy for the child results in a disruption of the self/Other distinction, and the phenomenon of Rieux’s pain in witnessing this suffering merges with that of the child’s pain. Their beating hearts are “united” against the futility of the human condition, and Rieux is overcome with the absurd idea that he might be able to “sustain” the life of the child. Also in *The Plague*, in Tarrou’s account of witnessing a trial in which the accused faced the death penalty, questions of innocence and guilt arise, also human frailty, mortality and justice:

I have kept only one image of that day, which is that of the guilty man. I really do believe he was guilty, though it doesn't matter of what. But this little man with his meagre red hair, some thirty years of age, seemed so determined to admit to everything, so sincerely terrified by what he had done and what they were going to do to him, that after a few minutes I had eyes only for him. He looked like an owl stricken with fear by an over-bright light. The knot of his tie was not precisely in the centre of his collar. He was chewing the nails of just one hand,

¹⁷ Camus, *The Plague*, 167.

the right... Well, I need say no more — you understand, he was alive.¹⁸

The vulnerability of the accused in the face of death is made poignant by the intimate detail of his physical appearance – these bitten nails, wonky tie and thinning hair belong to a man, not an idea. His willingness to admit to his crime, and his fear of “what he had done” make the reader question whether punishment is really necessary for repentance.

Similarly, in *The Outsider*,¹⁹ Camus’s use of a first-person narrator makes our experience of Meursault’s unfortunate story more acute, personal and poignant. Being privy to his own account of events, we know that Meursault is sentenced to death not for his crime of murder, but for his unwillingness to feign remorse to a morally unreflective courtroom and for “burying his mother like a heartless criminal”.²⁰ Meursault’s real crime is a lack of decorum and his inability to engage in the moral role-play of society; he is unwilling to tell a lie in court at the advice of his lawyer, simply “because it’s not true”.²¹ As readers, we are in direct communion with this flawed yet honest human, and are therefore more able to understand that his beginning a physical relationship with Marie the day after his mother’s death was not “indulg[ing] in the most shameful debauchery”.²² Rather, for Meursault, the two events were decontextualised by his longstanding desire for Marie:²³ his “physical needs often distorted his feelings”. Similarly, Meursault did not “kill [...] a man in order to resolve an intrigue on unconscionable immorality”,²⁴ he lost control in a moment of delirious heat and killed a man who was a danger to his friend. Camus’s literary technique allows us to transcend hasty ethical judgments and look into Meursault’s subjective reality, we are open-minded before an evaluative point of view we have good reason to resist.²⁵

¹⁸ Ibid., 191.

¹⁹ Albert Camus, *The Outsider*. trans. by Joseph Laredo, London: Penguin, 1982.

²⁰ Ibid., 93.

²¹ Ibid., 65.

²² Ibid., 92.

²³ We are told that Marie “used to be a typist at the office. I’d fancied her at the time, and I think she’d fancied me too.” Ibid., 23.

²⁴ Ibid., 92.

²⁵ A. Denham, 2014. “Representing Ethical Estrangement”, paper presented at the conference “*Art and Morality*,” Budapest, June 4–5, 2014.

3. Conclusion

Let's conclude with a pertinent remark from Wittgenstein. He once wrote:

in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case, as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be simile now seems to be mere nonsense.²⁶

Such a stance suggests that rhetorical and literary form has no place in the world of philosophy, and indeed that poetry deserves no place in the *polis*.²⁷ As we have seen though, Camus would beg to differ. When he wrote in 1938 that “[a] novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images”,²⁸ he offered his own solution to the “quarrel” between philosophy and the arts. Moral and philosophical meaning can be found precisely in the semantic gaps carved by rhetorical devices. Rather than dropping the simile, we should instead examine it as a whole, as we are looking for the kind of “facts” which cannot be expressed in direct, logical language. His philosophical texts are enriched with metaphor and imagery, and his literary works are given layers of meaning through rhetorical devices and techniques. Thus, Camus’s investigation of the relationship between literature and philosophy results in rich, nuanced linguistic form which drives at meanings ineffable and feelings inexpressible, demonstrating just how effective the literary register is at provoking philosophical reflection.



²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 1965, 3–12.

²⁷ Probably Wittgenstein himself would have disagreed with this line of argument, yet other philosophers may still deem it a persuasive rebuttal against the literary register.

²⁸ Albert Camus, “A Review of *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre”, in: *Selected Essays and Notebooks of Albert Camus*, trans. by P. Thody, London: Penguin 1979, 167.