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On the Lateral Readings of Fiction: Anti-Existentialism in Camus' *Stranger*

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ABSTRACT

This paper pursues three goals: First, to develop a lateral reading of Camus' *Stranger*. A lateral reading is characterized by the displacement of the central conflict. In the case of *The Stranger*, I argue that the central conflict in the novel lies in the relation between the author and the protagonist, not, as direct readings would have it, in the relation between the protagonist and his predicament. Second, to spell out more precisely why it should be read as an anti-existentialist novel. Here I argue that a lateral reading shows that the foundational existentialist opposition between telling and living is ironically dismantled by the very lateral structure of the novel. Third, to develop the notion of a lateral reading with a view to its potential advantages. Here, I point out that literalism involves positionalism and dynamicism. Positionalism refers to the reduction of fictional entities to their role in relation to each other. Dynamicism refers to the resulting view that those roles are further reducible to forces. I conclude that the lateral reading, with its commitments to positionalism and dynamicism is a model generalizable to the analysis of other fictional works.

KEYWORDS

Camus; existentialism; absurdism; narratology; fiction; literature

Introduction

This paper is motivated by the following remark: in Camus' *Strang*er, Meursault, the main character, seems defined by his reluctance to being a character: he is a man who refuses to have his story told. This places him at odds with the author of the story, whose job, by definition, is to tell this story. Indeed, it seems to suggest that a large part (perhaps all) of the drama of the book lies not in Meursault's story (where the central conflict has to do with the establishment of Meursault's guilt) but rather in the story of the conflict and struggle between Meursault and the author (where the conflict has to do with whether or not Meursault's story will be told).

This initial remark motivates the pursuit of three goals: the first is to develop a lateral reading of Camus' *Stranger* that can do justice to this tension between the author and the character. The second is to spell out more precisely why as a result, *The Stranger* should be read as an anti-existentialist novel and the third is to develop further the methodological potential of lateral readings.

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A lateral reading of *The Stranger*

The main claim of this section is that *The Stranger* should be read laterally, as the field in which unfolds the struggle to the death that pits the Author Camus and the Protagonist Meursault against each other. It follows the insight that there is some kind of irony in the story of a protagonist who explicitly refuses for his story to be told, that this irony informs the book in deep ways, and that the tension that constitutes this irony is best understood as the tension between two wills, that of the author, whose job it is to tell the story, and that of the protagonist, who defines himself as he who refuses for his story to be told. First, I argue for this lateral reading, and second, I try to provide a general sketch of the implications of such a reading.

What is a lateral reading?

A traditional fictional drama can be called direct. In such dramas, the conflict that motivates the narration remains within the fictional realm. It is a matter for example, of establishing whether Meursault will be sentenced (among several conflicts available in *The Stranger*). In this "direct" model, the reader's engagement is aimed at the conflict that obtains between the protagonist(s) and her predicament. The kind of drama at work in *The Stranger* however, should be called lateral.[1] In this case, as I will argue, the center of attention for the (competent) reader is not the conflict between Meursault and his predicament (say, his legal ordeal, or even his conflictual relation to the social world); rather, the reader's focus is trained on the relation between the protagonist and the story teller (whether we identify her with the author or the narrator). Here, I suggest, the question is not: will Meursault be sentenced? But rather, will the book succeed in telling Meursault's story, who of Meursault and Camus will win? Or more generally, will there be a story? I try to represent this summarily in the graphs below (Figures 1 and 2).

This lateral structure, I argue, is too central to the structure of *The Stranger* to be ignored. In this context, how should we interpret the book in such a way that we can do justice to this displacement of the dimension of reading, from direct to lateral? We can see from the outset that this question brings with it a series of problems: for example, to what extent should we reduce Meursault to his refusal of narration? Similarly, who or what is Meursault in conflict with? Is it the Author as a figure, the narrator, or Camus himself? Finally, in what sense can one seriously suggest that struggles can take place across the fiction/non-fiction divide? Can we truly say in any meaningful sense that Meursault is struggling with someone (whether the Author or Camus) who doesn't exist in the fictional realm? Finally, should we accept the notion implicit in this story of conflict between Meursault and the Author that the Author has lost sovereignty over their narrative?

Why read The Stranger *laterally?*

In Sartre's *Nausea* from 1938, Roquentin declares famously: "*il faut choisir: vivre ou raconter*." ["one must choose: living or telling"].[2] In the Preface to the American University Edition to *l'Étranger*, Camus characterizes Meursault as the man who refuses to lie, and it is quite clear that this refusal contains and entails the refusal of narration.[3]

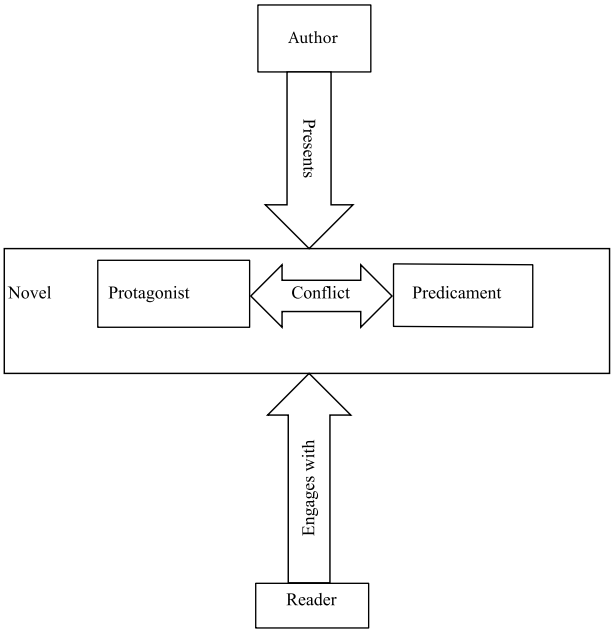

Figure 1. Direct reading.

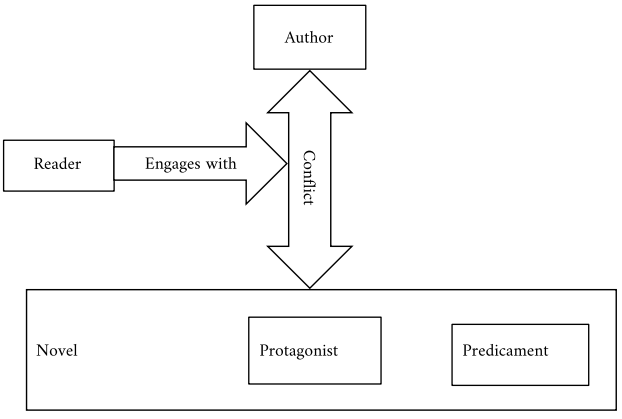

Figure 2. Lateral reading.

Indeed it seems the common understanding suggests that the world of meaning and convention is a world of lies because it is a world that distorts and misrepresents the realities it refers to[4]: indeed, Meursault suggests that all the accounts of his life that he sees others formulate throughout his trial have nothing to do with what really took place. The point here is not so much that these narratives have failed to report the facts, but rather, that no narrative can do so, that reality is distorted when it becomes narrated. In the context of Camus' self-description as an absurdist author, one should give more sharpness to this notion of lie. Camus has one specific lie in mind: namely the lie that *there is* meaning in one's life, and in the events of one's life.

Although critics have been using different terms to describe this rejection of narration, this is a very widely shared interpretation. It seems to me however that all those authors who have emphasized Meursault's refusal of explanation, narration, fiction, confession etc., have not made an obvious but necessary step: to compare it to the fact that the book *is* all this: explanation, narration, fiction, confession etc. This is a trivial point, but, as we shall discuss below, its having been overlooked in the literature (probably because it is so trivial) has consequences: Meursault is not just another character that novels can talk about. Insofar as his very essence is anti-novelistic, his presence within the novel threatens the novelistic project itself, and disturbs the usually assumed indifference of the character towards the author. This fact is so fundamental that it throws all these interpretations off: we cannot assume that for a novel to narrate the life of an individual who refuses for his life to be narrated is a mere anomaly.

Based on Meursault's refusal of narration and on the tension this refusal establishes in his very status as a fictional character, my claim in this section is that we should understand the novel as the result of the confrontation between two opposing forces, namely Meursault the protagonist (distinct, as McCarthy showed, from Meursault the narrator)[5] and Camus the author. In this reading, Meursault the character is defined as an anti-narrative force: he is defined by his refusal to narrate or to allow others to narrate his life. Against Meursault, Camus the author is a narrative force. This is, simply because he is an author, whose essence as author, is to be a drive to tell. Sartre points out the problem: "But how does one keep quiet with words? How does one render the unthinkable and disorderly succession of presents? This impossible task requires a new technique."[6] This new technique, Sartre suggests, is missing in Camus' book. Genette too, following Sartre, sees the novel confronted by a "technical paradox" whereby the narration is both motivated internally by Meursault and externally, presumably, by Camus-the-author.[7] In short, even Sartre and Genette believe that Meursault's essential incompatibility with narration is a hurdle to be overcome, a "technical" problem that taints the novel rather than is the very point of it. And indeed, as long as, like Sartre, one "explains" *The Stranger* with reference to the intentions of the man he calls "Mr. Camus," that is to say, as long as one commits oneself to the sovereignty of the author,[8] the failure to tell Meursault's story is exactly this: a failure. This internal tension, Sartre suggests, is not the point of the novel, but a hiccup in Camus' plan.

McCarthy offers an opposite reading of the same problem. For, over the voice of "Mr. Camus," who is a flawed and biased spokesperson for his novel, McCarthy suggests, that there is another voice that demands to be heard. McCarthy helpfully redirects our attention away from Mr. Camus to the persona of the narrator, for it is the narrator who is caught in the problem Sartre describes. As McCarthy argues, unlike the author, "the narrator of a novel can hardly be silent."[9] McCarthy's insistence on the narrator as essentially and exclusively a drive to tell (unlike Mr. Camus, who also enjoys other determinations) allows him to dramatize the stake of this tension: any success on Meursault's part in preventing his story form being told will involve the entire demise of the narrator. However, McCarthy shuts off the possibility of exploring the issue in more depth almost immediately. Disappointingly, he writes that a narrator can still remain committed to silence provided he "introduce into his tale the awareness that silence contains authenticity."[10] Solving the problem, McCarthy argues, does not require a whole new literary technique as Sartre believed. All it takes is to reach for the Barthian

"level zero" of writing and to "white" writing[11]: "Meursault [the narrator] does this in the first paragraph by the brevity of his sentences and by the absence of subordinate clauses which imply causality and hierarchy."[12] For Barthes (and after him McCarthy), *The Stranger* employs the degree zero of writing because it is the least narration necessary *for a novel to exist*, but the necessity for the novel to exist is not justified or questioned, even by Barthes. Rather, it is assumed. And this suggests a commitment to the sovereignty of the author that is unexpectedly conservative for someone like Barthes. In other words: Camus encountered a problem and resolved it stylistically. Nothing to see here.

Sartre, as we saw, was too quick in assuming that Camus failed in solving the tension that subsists between him and his character. McCarthy (like Barthes) it now appears, is too quick in assuming that Camus solved the problem. What they both share however, is the view that this tension is not the point of the novel, but a problem to be resolved.

It is impossible for me to demonstrate that one should interpret this tension as the "point" of the novel. But I would at least point to the fact that this is a possibility that is not even entertained by any of these commentators. Although the view that the novel fails or succeeds in dealing with the tension between Meursault and the narrator or the author may be justified, ignoring the third option (rather than refuting it) is not. It is this obliviousness that concerns me here. It is not difficult however, to see why McCarthy, Sartre and Genette are unable to entertain the idea that the point of the novel lies precisely in the tension we've described here. After all, the traditional procedure to determine what the point of a novel is involves referring to the author's intentions. In other words, we see here some remnants of a commitment to the sovereignty of the author, which informs the belief that the stylistic choices of "Mr. Camus" tell us something, indeed, everything there is to know, about the truth of the novel. This is taken to the extreme when Camus' own commitment to purity as a writer is taken to be a reason for us to read the same commitment as the main point of the novel itself and as the ground of the harmony, not the conflict, between Camus and Meursault (perhaps, as it has been suggested to the point that Meursault and Camus' voices should be seen as one).[13]

In this specific case, any reference to the author's intentions makes it impossible to take the conflict that opposes the author to the protagonist seriously, for it is the author's intentions that are in conflict with the protagonists' intention. In short, if my contention that the "point" of the novel lies in the tension that opposes the author (or the narrator) to the character is correct, it can only be by presupposing that the author is not sovereign over their novel. This is, of course, the main argument in Barthes' account of the death of the author, when he argues that the point of a novel is not in its origin (the author) but in its "destination," i.e. in the reader.[14] In short, this tension is the "point" of the novel if it is the reason we engage with the novel (regardless of the author's intentions). You will note that this is a promising hypothesis, for it is commonly accepted that conflicts are the focus of the reader's experience. Indeed, in a clear-sighted departure from his overall reading, McCarthy concedes in another place: "Literature is not easily escaped, and one doubts whether *The Stranger* is really seeking to escape it."[15] Interestingly, here McCarthy implicitly shifts from the author to the novel itself, this will afford us more elbow room to examine below what the "point" of the novel might be irrespective of its author's intentions.[16]

There is a second presupposition at work in the relative blindness exhibited by Sartre, Barthes, Genette and McCarthy. It lies in the attribution of an existentialist pathos to Meursault and/or to Camus. In this view, it is metaphysically inconsistent for the novel's point to be the establishment and examination of the tension between the refusal and the demand for narration, for this would amount to violating Roquentin's alternative between living and telling. As we shall see, this existentialist reading is wrong on many levels, and more importantly, it is impoverishing.

So, McCarthy is right, "the narrator of a novel can hardly be silent"[17] in spite of the novel's own subject matter. But this is not something to brush under the carpet or to explain away: it may be that it is the very matter at hand. The novel, I suggest, is playing with this impossibility and its interplay with the impossibility of narrating fully (i.e. by staging the conflict between, for example, Camus-the-author as narrative force and Meursault-the-character as its counter-force). So let's take this hypothesis seriously: *The Stranger* doesn't want "to escape it," what does it want to do, and how much can the existentialist reading survive what "*The Stranger*" truly does and says?

First, we can see that in *The Stranger*, even more than in other books, the necessity to have an account of the common ground (that is to say, a ground for their conflictual interaction) between the personae of the author and the protagonist (of the narrator too, but this would take us too far afield) is required: we must understand just how central this opposition of principle between the character and the author is. Is it, like the entire tradition argues, an anomaly, or is it exactly the kind of thing that the novel is telling us: that life is caught between telling and living? So we must follow the hypothesis that the main point of *The Stranger* is that it chronicles this tension and thereby ridicules the existentialist pathos where "one must choose."

So far I have argued that a lateral reading of *The Stranger* is plausible and that it will have some consequences on how we must understand the narratological structure of the novel (i.e. it should take into account the lack of sovereignty of the author) and consequently its metaphysical embedding (it is not an existentialist novel). I shall now explore in greater depth this second point: to what extent the narratological structure of the novel violates the tenets of existentialism (beyond Roquentin's alternative) so that the novel stands as a critique of existentialism rather than an endorsement of it. My main point here is that unlike existentialism, the novel affirms both the commensurability and the antagonism between living and telling.

Meursault's ambiguities

Meursault's constant efforts to refuse the transformation of his life into language have been well recorded in the literature (beginning with Camus' own admission in the postscript to the book). The first generation of critics, although they disagree on many counts, all insist on this aspect: *The Stranger*, Maurice Blanchot posits, is "a novel that doesn't explain."[18] The textual evidence also is in plain sight, and it has been reviewed many times through commentaries of the novels' second part. This includes the famous passages of Meursault's interview with the judge, the chaplain and the clerks, and Marie's visit, to which one might add the association of Meursault with blinding sunlight. Even Chaitin, who insists that Meursault's confessional moment is consistent with the rest of the novel, assumes that even this confession needs to be accounted for as

a *transformation* in Meursault's character.[19] In this light, whether Meursault's final confessional acts are the result of duress, of a reluctant transformation,[20] or even an act of "desire,"[21] it is understood as a victory for Camus-the-author against Meursault.

So, Camus-the-author needs Meursault's collaboration, or at least obedience, and Meursault stands as the limit of the sovereignty of Camus-the-author. Conversely, Camus-the-author limits Meursault's reluctance, and forces him into compromises and some sketches of a confession. Yet, it must be emphasized that he only does so because those compromises are latent in the first place: since the very opening page, Meursault refuses the world of conventions but he *understands* it. He responds appropriately to the telegram announcing his mother's passing, he fetches an arm band from Emmanuel in preparation for her funeral, and he contradicts himself when responding to Marie that asking if he loves her is meaningless whilst following that up with "I think not," which is meaningful indeed (McCarthy suggests it might even be a sign of meaningful—rather than silent—protest, prefiguring the full-scale protest against the chaplain).[22] Camus himself, in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, gives the lie to his existentialist readers. One cannot choose between life and lie, he argues, for lies begin with life itself. So it is assumed that Meursault is already—if minimally—compromised. One begins to think and to engage in "lies" *because*, not *in spite of*, the fact that one lives at all:

> Beginning to think means beginning to be undermined. Society doesn't have anything to do with these beginnings. The worm is there in the heart of man. That is where it must be sought. This deadly game that takes us from clear-sightedness before existence to an escape out of the light, one must follow and understand it.[23]

In other words, it seems that the theme of the novel is not the opposition of life and telling, but rather, their interdependence. The minimal writing that Barthes, McCarthy and others rely so heavily on doesn't evade the fact that Meursault, like anyone, is always already engaged with meaning.

In *The Stranger*, these moments are not only used to sustain the novel, but also staged. The ones that are staged could all be reduced to two categories: those from Part I that demand that Meursault engage with the world of conventional meanings, and those from Part II that demand for Meursault to explain or narrate himself. This suggests that the change from Part I to Part II is not one from a Meursault who refuses the world of meaning to one who caves in and accepts it but one much more incremental shift where this engagement, which was always there, becomes reflexive.

Incidentally, this pleads in favor of Chaitin's "linear" understanding of the move from Part I to Part II[24]; rather than the traditional interpretation of this move as a break, as in Blanchot[25] and Sartre for example. For those "ruptural" readings are precisely committed to the existentialist division of authenticity (in part I) and facticity (in part II). Indeed, they depend on a strong reading of this division. Following Chaitin, we should instead note that in all of these cases, belonging to both part I and part II, we see the hand of Camus the master-confessor because these episodes are the ones that maintain the tenuous possibility of there being a novel. Without the telegram which opens the narrative, and which is the "quintessence of writing,"[26] the novel would not start and indeed, it starts only because Meursault, in spite of his claim that "it means nothing," understands the writ and responds to it appropriately, by visiting his mother's home. Without Marie's questioning about marriage and love, the extent of Meursault's

alienation from the world of meaning as convention, and the strength of his commitment to the world of meaning as reality would not be taken in: he would look like a normal enough kind of chap. The same goes for the confessions in Part II, which function as a means by which the refusal of confession becomes systematic, explicit and thematised.

In short, any purist reading of Meursault as a "transparent window opening up onto the things, and blind to significations"[27], as an existentialist hero, who is a champion of self-sovereignty, is disabled alongside the sovereignty of the author: Meursault may represent the best attempt at resisting self-narration, he is nonetheless always already compromised. This makes his protestations not heroic but wishful, if not downright hypocritical. In this logic, Chaitin is correct in his opposition to those readers who regard the second part of the novel as artificial.[28] For the charge of artificiality relies on a falsely purist reading of the first part, one that ignores that there is no room in the novel (indeed, in any novel, and by implication, in any life) for a character that lives without confessing (especially when that character narrates in the first person). It is only from a naively existentialist reading of the first part that the break can be seen as problematic, and that part II could look inconsistent with part I. The second part is not artificial therefore, and neither is it a break from the first part. It is, rather, the result of the many compromises through which Meursault's initially minimal willingness to engage with the fake world of meanings becomes irresistibly extended (Chaitin, describes this process as "the birth of the subject"),[29] and a revelation of the fact that his reluctance towards meaning was in fact not a natural or spontaneous attitude, but an ideologically stubborn and idealistic belief in authenticity.

We sense already how the novel takes an ironic stance towards existentialism. The second part simply reveals the internal contradictions of Meursault's attempts to unify facticity (life as it is) to authenticity and retrospectively suggests that the first part was only the chronicle of Meursault's desperate attempts at keeping such tensions at bay. In this sense, Chaitin is correct to see the second part as one in which Meursault acquires a desire for confession against those readers who see his confession as extracted under duress, but he is wrong in seeing this desire as originating there: the novel points to the fact that this desire is fundamental and its roots shoot back to part I.[30] In this sense, the debate between Chaitin and his opponents is probably a false debate. The question is not whether the desire for narration precedes the confession or follows from it. Meursault was always on his way to confession because he confesses in small ways all along, and he confesses in small ways all along because confession is constitutive of his being as a character.

So, Camus forces Meursault into compromises, and it is only insofar as he does so that the book exists. The fact that it is a short book testifies to the worthy struggle put up by Meursault nonetheless. Or rather, it testifies to the relative balance of forces between them. At the end of this examination of the relations between parts 1 and 2, Meursault is recognized as a man inhabited by two forces, not just one. The first is the force of compromise and the second is the reluctance to narration. The force of compromise must be understood in relation to two elements. The first is simply the author's force: for the novel to even exist, Meursault must live in a human world. He must, for example, be able to read telegrams and know what is expected of him at his mother's funeral. The second is some "principle of psychological credibility": once the first condition is fulfilled, the first compromise is set, and the first determination of the character is set, the

further determinations will have to be consistent with that first one. If that is the case, this conflict suggests that Meursault is quite literally an impossible character: he cannot be a character, or at least, he cannot remain one for very long.

Remember how Roquentin's existentialist vision connected life with authenticity and opposed life to narration. What *The Stranger* presents us with, on the contrary, is the association of authenticity with death, and ipso fact, the connection of inauthenticity with life. For the reluctance to narration, which is Meursault's defining tendency, is immediately associated to death. As Freud shows very well, the death-drive can never be a unique drive, for only those who take the trouble to live carry a death-drive (the others are dead). So Meursault's internal conflict could be reformulated as a conflict between the drive to life and the death drive. And indeed, the struggle between Camus the author and Meursault the protagonist is a struggle to the death. This is not only because Meursault dies by execution because of his refusal to comply with his lawyer's advice to narrate his own story and explain himself. It is also because it is this obsession with self-identity, immediacy and transparency, which causes the murder, the irruption of death in the novel, and of course, initiates the death of Meursault as an echo of that first death, the death of the Arab. The death of Meursault, therefore, is necessary (pace Blanchot who thought it was contrived),[31] and his confession is just as necessary, as it is the result, unavoidable from the perspective of the principle of psychological credibility, of his reluctance towards meaning: in the legal system, which is saturated with hermeneutic and semantic reconstructions, understandings and judgments, this reluctance can only express itself in an explosion of defiance, and therefore be brought to its own contradiction: the reluctance to meaning-making requires meaning-making in protest, and Meursault's life becomes unlivable. Camus himself, in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, writes that death is related to the failure of understanding: one's inability to make sense, to create meaning. At the limit, Camus is telling us that the existentialist ideal of authenticity which involves a heroic resistance to the distortions of meaning-making is a death sentence: "Killing oneself, in a sense, just like in a melodrama, is a confession. It is confessing to being overwhelmed by life or that we fail to understand it."[32]

An implicit and intuitive formulation of the view I am proposing has been present in the literature for a long time. McCarthy understand the *Myth of Sisyphus* as beginning with a question that is very analogous to the one that structures my reading: "Can a philosophical treatise, Camus wonders, be written about a topic that defies philosophy? [like a novel about someone who refuses to be told]. But he admits that 'classical dialectic' cannot be banished, because man cannot prevent himself from analyzing and making judgements."[33] According to Camus, it seems any human must be engaged in what Meursault refuses, and this suggests that the latter is a stranger in yet another sense: a stranger to the human race. And this is emphasized by the association of Meursault with the sun: that is to say, the opposite of fiction, a light that discloses things as they are, without creating any distortion of interference, in particular, without projecting any shadows, a light without any perspectives which represents Meursault's fantasy of transparency (which is praised by Sartre who attributes it to Camus rather than to Meursault) and of oneness with reality (or Meursault's "metaphors of totality").[34] Such moments of unity are always sunny moments, and the unity of Meursault with the sun climaxes at the very moment of the killing of the Arab. McCarthy insightfully concludes: "So the experience of oneness marks not merely that death is near but that some kind of truth or

harmony has been attained"[35] and as Eisensweig points out, this should be placed in the context of Meursault's own admission that he killed "à cause du soleil."[36] But as the novel had warned in the first pages: the sun is "inhuman."[37] It is Meursault's merging with the sun which transitions him into "unhappiness"[38] and later, into death: the long-sought authenticity that consists in identity with the self and identity with the world (represented by the sun) turns out to coincide with unhappiness and death. Thus, the desire for authenticity undermines itself: it is a desire for a true, fully human life, and at the same time, all it has to offer is "inhuman" death. The novel is now beginning to lay the ground for an ethics of life built in opposition to an ethics of authenticity: the lack of fullness is not an accident of human life, but its very essence. The first sign that the existentialist duality of authenticity and inauthenticity is insufficient for understanding the novel is therefore anthropological: this non-transparency is what being a human being is. But the second sign, as discussed above, is narratological: characters are made of meaning. So this leaves us with the anthropological impossibility of authenticity echoed in the narratological impossibility of silence. Instead of seeing the novel as an anomaly standing in its own way, we can now glimpse a more organic unity: the novel, as such (and in spite of its component parts, the narrator or Meursault), chronicles the impossibility and unliveability of Meursault's attempt to stay silent. In this sense, the opposition between authenticity and inauthenticity becomes rejected to make room for a novel that presents life as the unstable balance between a drive to meaning (through narration) and a drive to authenticity (through mutism). For, as Camus points out, Meursault is animated by the principle of life *and* by the principle of death. This is not a sheer contradiction because the notion of life embraced by Meursault is so radical and absolute that it leads to death: the impossibility to deal with an imperfectly authentic life leads to murder followed by suicide by confession. This is why the struggle to the death between Camus-the-author and Meursault-the-character is at once won and lost by Camus when Meursault dies, for the death of Meursault involves the end of the narrative, and so, the demise of Camus-the-author who is identified as the drive to narration: life, it seems, cannot be on either side, but it is in the middle, for the only life that remains is the life of the novel, which does not cease, as long as it is not reduced to any of the pre-existing personae, narrator, author, or protagonist.

This suggests that we should read *The Stranger* as the chronicle of Meursault's coming to face the contradictions inherent in his refusal of lies. In a sense, this interpretation goes against almost all of the scholarship on *The Stranger*. However, it follows directly from it. This is, as I have argued, because that scholarship both encounters this contradiction in many guises and refuses to take it seriously, but rather dismisses it as an anomaly. This is, in turn presumably due to the near-obsessive emphasis on the Sartrean-existentialist theme in *The Stranger*, which requires that between authenticity and inauthenticity, there be no in-between. Yet, as is well-known, Camus endorses the absurdist label and he rejects the existentialist one.

So, it seems that the lesson of the novel is neither in favor of Camus-the-author and the drive towards narration nor in favor of Meursault-the-character and his drive to authenticity. It lies in an ironic problematization of this very opposition, and this is what is told by the voice of the fourth person, the voice of the novel itself. This problematization, I claim additionally, is exactly what defines "absurdism" and makes it incompatible with existentialism.

The dynamic proposal

So far, I hope to have established that a lateral reading of *The Stranger* is plausible and desirable and that it entails an anti-existentialist interpretation: if the "point" of the novel is the conflict between a confessional force and a drive to mutism, it is insofar as the alternative between living and telling is untenable. This seems promising but the reliance on the lateral model raises questions of its own, and if it is incapable of addressing them, it may undermine the plausibility of any lateral reading. As a bonus, I also think that addressing these issues will allow me to flesh out the lateral model in ways potentially useful for other literary works.

I see two such central questions. The first has to do with the fact that the lateral reading presupposes that the author has lost her sovereign position, the second has to do with the fact that it reduces characters to narrative personae. As a bonus, I also think that addressing these issues will allow me to flesh out the lateral model in ways potentially useful for other literary works.

Laterality and the death of the author

The first point is the most obvious: if there is anything like a conflict between the author and the character, if the character can oppose any sort of resistance to the will of the author, this is only on the background of an intuition later formulated by Barthes as the death of the author. As I briefly discuss above, this is also consistent with the shift from the "intention of the author" to the "point of the novel." This question may be addressed in a most minimal manner. It is important to suggest that the lateral reading involves the author's loss of sovereignty. It is also important to propose a reading of *The Stranger* in particular, that undermines this sovereignty. But it is no longer the kind of proposal that appears so controversial as to need defending. I will therefore restrict myself to one additional remark: that with the author's loss of sovereignty, the unity of the novel becomes problematized. The notion of the death of the author supports (possibly even requires) a plurivocal notion of text. Plurivocal, in this context, means the combination of a multiplicity of what literary theorists call "voices." As is probably quite visible, the multivocal dimension of an authorless text replaces a unified text with a multivocal setup, where the only unity that is forthcoming is polyphonic. As Burke points out, the author becomes defined merely as the unity of the novel, thereby illustrating the intuitive recognition that the alternative to the author, is somehow or in some sense "the novel."[39] So far, I have merely suggested, in insufficiently clear terms, that in the example of *The Stranger*, the unity of the novel lies in its central conflict which is the struggle to the death of the author-confessor against the reluctant character. This led me to suggest that the best way to think of the unity that constitutes the novel is as a field, a space, indeed, the battlefield within which Camus and Meursault engage in combat. We must now ask further questions about this unity.

Following up on the image of a battlefield, I suggest we look at the novel as a space of convergence between the diverse voices that narratologists have traditionally identified: narrators, characters and plots. It is this notion of convergence which I suggest will offer us completeness and unity. But it is, of course, quite vague. How do characters converge? How do they converge with plots or narrators? This leads us into two problems. The first

is a problem of incommensurability: how can objects of different kinds have any convergence point? The second is a problem of completeness: when I say two characters converge, I might mean something about their opinions, i.e. that they agree. I might also mean something about their motions: i.e. that they find themselves in the same place. But in either case, I am only referring to one aspect of them (opinions or bodies), not to all of them, and any theory of a novel that relies heavily on any notion of convergence is at risk of reductionism: for there to be a central focus to a novel that now escapes the powers of its author involves that we will have to regard each fictional object (and in particular, each character), not in terms of its intrinsic properties, but in terms of its role in the unifying conflict. This leads us into the second, more substantial question.

Laterality and dynamism

The second point is perhaps less obvious, and it is best approached through the issue of commensurability. In the lateral reading, the central relationship (which constitutes the "point" of the novel) is the relationship that obtains between the author and the character. That is to say, it is a relationship that violates the separation between the real-world and the fictional world. This involves that the author reaches into the fictional world and that conversely, the character reaches into the "real-world." This, at first blush, places two requirements on the lateral reading: first, that one explains how there can even be a ground of commensurability between character and author when they belong to presumably entirely distinct worlds. The second, that one explains what aspects exactly of the author and of the protagonist are commensurable with each other: what is it about them that applies across the fiction/real-world separation. I will argue below that the ground of commensurability in question is the ground of force, and that it is only as forces that the author and the protagonist can truly be said to interact. As I shall discuss below, this involves, in turn, that we take a positional view of the author and the protagonist.

Positionalism

As I suggest above, the lateral reading loses the advantage of commensurability, where interaction between fictional entities is assured by their common, fictional essence. The lateral reading I advocate here is faced with the challenge to restore commensurability but this time, across the fiction/reality divide, and it does this by reducing its characters to their functions. In a lateral text, fictional entities are defined in terms of their position in the conflict. Although this is a view that has its roots in early social anthropology,[40] the notion of positionalism has been developed by psychologists[41] and later, by feminist psychologists,[42] to refer to the reduction of persons to their roles. In the literary context, Camus himself uses the word "behaviorism" for the same idea, when he declares that he was inspired by the "behaviorism" of American writers like Hemingway and Steinbeck.[43] Merleau-Ponty, a mere few years later (and in the context of a polemic with Camus himself), refers to Meursault's brother, Koestler's Rubashov in *Darkness at Noon*, as "a certain X upon whom were imposed tasks clearly called for by the situation? Not even the danger of death could bring him to withdraw into himself."[44]

This behaviourism, this externalism and this positionalism all converge: they reduce characters to functions, depriving them of any individual and singular essence to leave only their position in a conflict with another persona. In the case of *The Stranger*, what is at issue is the reduction of Meursault to his status as the opponent of Camus-the-author. This reduction is implied if we say that the organic principle of the novel is the conflict across the fiction/non-fiction divide, for this requires that from the point of view of this conflict, only their mutual antagonism matters and, if the idea that this is the conflict that motivates the reading is true, that any additional characteristics attributed to Meursault or the author are derived from this role. For if within a fiction, characters can be substantial, across the fiction/non-fiction divide, their essence is reducible to what they count as for the non-fictional voices: the author.

So, it seems that the first step in addressing the problem of unity and of commensurability involves a positional outlook: the internal ("personal") determinations of characters, authors or narrators are irrelevant to those relationships in which they are involved but which transcend the fictional/real-world boundary. All we remain entitled to claim is that insofar as they are involved in these relations, they are reducible to positions in this relation. Indeed, in the case of *The Stranger*, we have seen how Meursault may be reduced to a will to mutism and the author to a will to tell.

This should put us on the track of our next step: if the unity of a novel after the death of the author lies in its core conflict, then not only should we reduce fictional entities to their role, function or position, but we also can determine a priori that these roles, functions and positions should be understood in terms of a conflict, i.e. that the positionalism in question involves a reduction of entities to their defining *will*. Indeed, it is almost trivial to suggest that the only property that is shared between a character and her author (for example), is that they both are involved in undertakings. It seems this will-like quality is adept at crossing the fiction/real-world divide, indeed, that it is the sole property that the character and the author retain after this crossing has been accomplished.

Dynamism

All of this suggests that lateralism requires positionalism. In turn, I wish to argue here that positionalism requires "dynamicism," i.e. the view that the "positions" to which the narrative personae are reduced are best conceived as "forces." In the case of Meursault and Camus-the-author, this makes Meursault a force of mutism and Camus-the-author a force of confession; and nothing else (recall the intrinsic, or personalistic determinations have been abandoned in the crossing of the fiction/real-world divide).

The dynamic view regards a narrative as the result of an encounter of *forces*. Therefore, it regards fictional entities (characters, events, places and material objects) and the personae involved in fiction-making (narrator(s) and authors principally) as forces too. Additionally, and consequently, this suggests that the narrative itself should be conceived as both the *space* within which these forces interact, and the *result* of these forces. It is within the narrative space that the three personae interact, and the narrative is the result of their interaction, just like the borders between two hostile countries are a loosely stable result of an opposition of forces.

This, however, raises two objections: the first demands that we explain how, once reduced to their mere status of forces, the three personae can even enter into conflict. Indeed, forces that are mere forces (and therefore stripped of any intrinsic determinations and motivations) don't have any *reason* to oppose each other, or even interact with each other. It is only once determined as *this* or *that* force, or what they are forces *towards* (i.e. it is only once they are individuated and assigned an identity which renders them discrete from each other) that conflicts between them can arise. The second is the threat of circularity: how can a novel be both the condition for the interaction between the three personae that inhabit it, *and* the result of this interaction? Both worries can be addressed together, I think, and this will allow us to go one step deeper into what the dynamic view might contribute. The answer to both of these worries can be found by focusing on the process of constitution of the novel. In that process, the author, the narrator and the character all come into their own, that is to say, they increasingly become identifiable as respectively author, narrator and character, and coincidentally, they incrementally become differentiated from each other: they come into focus. This means that the novel too, as the initial place of their encounter, becomes developed out of their encounter so that all that is presupposed initially is a novel as pure condition of their encounter—therefore quite a different thing from the novel which is the object that results from this encounter. This should suffice to address the circularity problem.

This also suggests that as the narration-constitution process progresses, identities become distributed. This happens initially, the dynamic view claims, in terms of *forces*, and later (if at all), in terms of *people*. As wills, the characters stand as a drive to a certain goal, and in the process of this pursuit, which involves interaction with resistances and oppositions, they develop a certain *way to be* in the narrative world, also known as a character or a persona. Note that this doesn't necessarily imply that the narrative course of events is deterministic, simply that the range of possible turns of events becomes narrower as the personae become more defined: as characters becomes fleshed out, the reader's expectations about them become more precise, and the author becomes bound to these expectations in incremental ways. If (in the case of lateral readings at least) all parts of a fiction are reducible to forces, a fiction can be understood as a convergence of mutually resisting forces. The dynamic view points out that in the relevant cases, narration is a multipartite process where forces *limit* each other, and, now that she has been stripped of her sovereign power, the author is only one of these forces.[45] Finally, the dynamic approach allows us to make sense of the opposing intuitions related to the status of "truth" in fiction. Under that proposal, what is "fictionally true"[46] is what is expressed not by any privileged persona, but by the voice of the narrative itself. Different characters can formulate untruths, so can narrators, and so can authors too (additionally, most of the time the problem with authors is that it is impossible to know what truth they hold on to, even if they tell any). In short, the dynamic view sees the narrative as a synthetic and irreducible voice, and therefore offers a focal point for interpretation without committing to the kind of sovereign author incompatible with the "conflict-based" reading I have been presenting here.

Let me insist on the potential contribution of the dynamic view. It possesses, we can now see, the advantage of satisfying two oft-mentioned requirements: 1) the requirement to account for the relative autonomy of the work from its author and her intentions (and

therefore the widespread modern view that the author is not "sovereign" or is "dead"); and 2) the requirement to offer accounts in which the perspectives of the standard three "personae" at work (the narrator, the protagonist(s) and the author) are not discrete, but unified organically. In addition to addressing these two common worries, this method is promising for another two reasons: 3) it offers a way of accounting for the voice of the work as irreducible to the voice of any of the personae involved in it (including the author or the narrator), and 4) it offers a way to identify the epistemic standard at work within any fiction (what makes what "true" in the fiction) and to explain its role, even after the death of the author.

The dynamic method and existentialism

In the context of Camus' work, one additional point should be made: the dynamic view has strong affinities with the existentialist outlook. As such, it offers promising perspectives for understanding the affinities between existentialism and literature. These affinities, like existentialism itself, are ambivalent. Existentialism concerns itself with two thematic fields: the first is that of facticity and inauthenticity, and the second is that of authenticity. They are obviously related but keeping them separate is important. The analysis of facticity leads into an account of alienation, generally formulated in terms of a reduction of the self to their externally (and socially) attributed features, a submission of the self to "the others" and their gaze. On the side of authenticity, existentialism employs a *via negativa*: authenticity is what alienation makes us aware of, and it manifests itself through its absence. This immediately gives it a normative form: authenticity is *to be achieved*. The zone that lies between alienation and authenticity is occupied by anxiety: the mismatch between the actual (factitious) and the possible (authenticity or alienation).

In the dynamic view, all personae, and in particular the protagonists, are defined and confronted to adversity, that is, with external forces that constitute and refine the drive that they embody. But the dynamic view also involves a meditation on the impossibility of achieving authenticity, and it suggests a reason in principle for this impossibility: if all characters are themselves indeterminate forces, there is no self to be loyal to: any opposition will overdetermine the forces at play in it (bestow an identity upon them) and therefore be a step towards alienation. As we saw, this is the case with Meursault, who, despite his fantasies of authenticity, cannot help being always-already caught up in narration. Withdrawing from any opposition would constitute alienation also: for, as Nietzsche insists, a force that doesn't express itself against resistances is no force at all.[47]

By making the impossibility of authenticity a principle of literature, the dynamic view goes one step beyond classical (e.g. Sartrean) existentialism. For Sartre, the impossibility of authenticity is after all contingent: authenticity has an ontological privilege (it is truer, or more appropriate to being) and an ontic disadvantage (in practice, life has a way of getting in the way of authenticity). If the dynamic view is right therefore, in the context of literature, this distinction between the ontological and the ontic fails: in the case of narratives at least, the impossibility of authenticity is ontologically grounded and constitutive. This is the third moment of the ambiguous relations of existentialism and literature, an ironic moment: existentialist literature is condemned to being an ironic and critical commentary on the pathos of authenticity.[48]

Conclusion

This paper pursued three goals: first, to develop a lateral reading of Camus' *Stranger*, second, to spell out more precisely why it should be read as an anti-existentialist novel and third, to develop the notion of a lateral reading with a view to its potential advantages.

Existentialism, in the Sartrean sense common in the Forties, makes three claims. The first, metaphysical one, is that the fundamental polarities of human life are the two mutually exclusive poles of authenticity and inauthenticity. The second, normative one, is that authenticity is the standard of achievement of any truly human life. The third one is that the second follows from the first. Camus maintained that his novel was not existentialist, and indeed, the lateral reading I have been proposing here shows why. Meursault is an ideal exponent of the normative existentialist stance: he is, insofar as he is anything, an anti-narrative force. Camus-the-author is the ideal exponent of the inauthentic force of the confessor: the drive to tell and therefore, to lie. Authenticity and inauthenticity are both false, because their mutual opposition—Roquentin's alternative—fails: Meursault cannot fulfill his refusal of narration because he is always caught up in it. He cannot, likewise, remain reluctant to meaning-making without building self-aware attachments to this reluctance itself, stand for it, and militate for it through discourse. It is this attachment that turns into discourse in Part II and signals the demise of his character as an anti-narrative force. But this fate was sealed from the start: his attachment to life could not exist without an attachment to arbitrary meaning-making. And so *The Stranger* chronicles the way in which life turns out to be detached from authenticity, and the sun of transparency is now associated with death. In this perspective, we are now able to propose a retrospective reconsideration of the moment of authenticity in existentialism: it itself could be reduced to a force: it is an attachment, not a mode of being, and as such, it exists only as a set of behaviors that ritually and vacuously honor this attachment. The character that seeks to remain authentic is therefore only another force in the economy of the novel. This is, I argue, the conceptual foundation that underlies *The Stranger*. The novel's essence lies in its ironic glance cast towards Meursault's fanaticism of authenticity. In its ironic attitude, the novel carves out a place for its own voice, dependent on the personae of the novel and yet transcending them.[49]

When Camus denied that his novel was existentialist, he should have added that it is more than that, it is a scathing critique of existentialism. In his review of la *Nausée*, the very text which presents Roquentin's alternative, Camus himself accuses Sartre in those terms: in the novel, he writes, theory betrays life ("*la théorie fait du tort à la vie*").[50] What is left is an ironic view of this alternative, and a space for life as a struggle between these two polarities. This space is the space of the novel within which no persona is sovereign, and this space is exactly coextensive with the space of irony: the ironic view of the alternative between authenticity and inauthenticity is the space of life, and indeed our life is the continual double effort to find an optimal compromise between the forces of authenticity and inauthenticity, between living and telling, and an effort to take an ironic distance from this effort itself. The combination of these two stances, to which we are condemned, is called, Camus suggests, absurdism.

Notes

1. For this notion of "lateral" I follow Merleau-Ponty, who connects it to "style" (*Visible*, 188) and "manner" (*Visible*, 25) that is to say, to formalism, and to the speaker's loss of sovereignty over language (*Visible*, 125). "The other can enter into the universe of the seer only by assault, as a pain and a catastrophe; he will rise up not before the seer, in the spectacle, but laterally, as a radical casting into question of the seer. Since he is only pure vision, the seer cannot encounter an other, who thereby would be a thing seen; if he leaves himself, it will only be by a turning back of the vision upon himself; if he finds an other, it will only be as his own being seen. There is no perception of the other by me; abruptly my ubiquity as a seer is belied, I feel myself seen—and the other is that X yonder which I do indeed have to think in order to account for the visible body that I suddenly feel myself to have." (*Visible*, 78).
2. Sartre, *Nausée* 1938: 64.
3. Camus, *Stranger*, 1955/1956.
4. Eisenzweig, *Jeux*, 11–17.
5. McCarthy, *Stranger.*
6. Sartre, "Explication".
7. Genette, *Récit*.
8. Foucault, "Auteur" 73–104; North, "Authorship," 1377.
9. McCarthy, *Stranger*, 17.
10. Id. Ibid.
11. Barthes, *Ecriture*.
12. McCarthy, *Stranger*, 17.
13. Servoise, "Voix," 879–892.
14. Barthes, "Death," 148.
15. McCarthy, *Stranger*, 110.
16. Fitch argues that *The Stranger* "constitutes a critical conundrum precisely because its real concern is the whole activity of interpretation and the problems it poses" (p. 67), leading to a controversy about whether Camus' fiction can be analyzed irrespectively of its themes (Fitch's avowed ambition). It seems to me that although Fitch's interpretation is aiming in the right direction, the problem is wrongly posed. The alternative is not between a thematic and a formal reading, but it is between analyzing what the voice of Camus or the voice of the novel offers us. This, of course, requires a methodology, like the lateral approach, that makes room for a fourth voice. Fitch, *Narcissistic*, 58. See also 67.
17. McCarthy, 17.
18. Sartre, "Explication," 105. See also, Barthes, *Zero* and Blanchot, "Roman."
19. Chaitin, "Confession."
20. Chaitin, "Subject," 163–179.
21. Chaitin, "Confession"163–175.
22. McCarthy, *Stranger*, 26.
23. Camus, Pléiade, 222.
24. Chaitin, "Subject".
25. Blanchot, "Roman."
26. Eizenzweig, *Jeux*, 11.
27. Sartre, "Explication," 107.
28. See note 19 above.
29. Chatin, "Subject."
30. Id.
31. Blanchot "Roman."
32. Camus, Pléiade, 222.
33. McCarthy, *Stranger*, 75; Camus, Pléiade, 222.
34. McCarthy, *Stranger*, 17.
35. McCarthy, *Stranger*, 70.

36. Eizenzweig, *Jeux*, 53–56.
37. Camus, *Stranger*, 15.
38. Camus, *Stranger*, 59.
39. Burke, *Form*, 1974, 68.
40. Durkheim and Mauss, *Primitive*, 2009 (1903), 2–4.
41. Slater, "Identification," 1961; Winch, "Determinants," 1962.
42. Chodorow, "Personality"; Gilligan, *Voice*. In particular, Gilligan's suggestion that positionalism in moral judgment is a feature of the male psyche while personalism is a feature of the female psyche, arouses the intriguing prospect that lateral literary analysis and the literary works that it applies to may be related to the male psyche, while direct reading and the applicable texts be related to the female psyche.
43. Servoise, "Voix," 883.
44. Merleau-Ponty, *Terror*, 1948, 3.
45. See for example, Burke, *Form*, 1974 67).
46. Walton, *Mimesis*, 1990, 3 ff.
47. Nietzsche, *Nachlass* IX [151].
48. On the possible essential incompatibility between literature and existentialism, see Chouraqui, "Roth."
49. Fitch picks up on the ironic position that comes out, as it were laterally (or as I just suggested, transcendentally) from the novel, but he assigns it to the author himself, thereby restoring the sovereignty of the author and attributing to one persona two contradictory purposes: one is the confessorly function and the other is the ironic functions (which takes an ironic view of the confessorly function among others). (Fitch, *Narcissistic*.)
50. Camus, "Sartre," 1938.

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