

## Camus Facing the Problem of Evil, « partagé entre la douleur et la beauté »

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« La peste: réduit tous les systèmes »  
(*Carnets, Œuvres complètes* II.923).<sup>1</sup>

« Parler répare »  
(*L'Homme révolté*, III.68).

To charges of atheism, Albert Camus provocatively reacts in his *Carnets*, « Je ne crois pas à Dieu *et* je ne suis pas athée » (IV.1197). Instead, the French Algerian writer considers himself an « incroyant » (II.470). The Nobel laureate's « epistemic humility » resembles an agnostic's (Carlson 57): he proceeds « en possession d'aucune vérité absolue », « optimiste quant à l'homme [...] au nom d'une ignorance qui essaie de ne rien nier » (II.470, 473). Yet, despite this position, the perceived silence of God and the attendant theological problem of evil haunt this resolute humanist's work.

Indeed, a preoccupation with evil, which Camus names in the immediate post-war period « le grand problème qui travaille le monde aujourd'hui », runs through his writings (II.503). Along with its corollary, suffering, evil abolishes all systems, as he insists in the above-cited April 1941 note laconically assessing the allegorical, and hence polysemic, plague. Unmerited suffering challenges theodicies, attempts to « justifie the ways of God to men », in *Paradise Lost*'s famous turn of phrase (Milton I.26). Efforts to (re)solve or to dissolve into a greater underlying harmony the irreconcilability of divine goodness and omnipotence with the existence of evil rest upon suffering's merit – a problematic premise, particularly post-Holocaust. Denying death's « sacred[ness] », Camus refuses this intellectual and ethical move (I.123). His texts reject any philosophical recuperations of natural evil (disease, death) or moral evil (Caligula, Hitler, Stalin) – whether they be religious (e.g., Augustinian<sup>2</sup>), historical (Hegelian), or political (Marxist).<sup>3</sup> « [J]e continue à lutter contre cet univers où des enfants souffrent et meurent », he insists before the Dominicans of Latour-Maubourg (II.471). Ten years later in “Appel pour une trêve civile en Algérie”, he pleads again, « aucune cause ne justifie la mort de l'innocent » (IV.374). Instead, the author of *La Peste* (1947) stands with the fictional Judge Othon's young son, whose agony refigures the paradigmatic suffering of the « blameless » Job, a « scandal » which Ivan Karamazov could have narrated (*NRSV*, Job 1.1; II.181).

A curious secular avatar of the biblical Job, Camus thus sounds the depths of devastation in a disenchanted world in which God, nonexistent or effectively dead, no longer speaks « out of the whirlwind » (Job 38.1). For his contemporary Emmanuel Levinas, « la destruction de tout équilibre entre la théodicée explicite et implicite de la pensée occidentale et les formes que la souffrance et son mal puisent dans le déroulement même de ce siècle » is nothing short of « révolutionnaire » (“La Souffrance” 114). Camus knew all too well the destruction the Jewish philosopher evokes: born on the brink of an unprecedented war which would rob him of his father, he struggled with tuberculosis; partook in the Resistance; spoke out early against Hitlerism, Hiroshima, and the Shoah; experienced ostracism after denouncing communist totalitarianism and the violent excesses on both sides of the Algerian conflict; and met an untimely death in a car crash.

If Camus’s scholarly reception and reputation have waxed and waned over the years, his prodigious corpus has sustained popular and critical interest over the last few decades. This article joins recent publications exploring Camus’s engagement with the sacred (Auroy and Prouteau; Dubois; Montgomery), Christianity (Faes and Basset; Cristaudo), and the problem of evil (Sharpe; Hoskins; Sutton). Understandably, some overlap exists amongst these three lines of inquiry. I refer here as relevant to scholars who study these first two thematics (the sacred, Christianity) and approach the third (the problem of evil) from a somewhat different angle. Matthew Sharpe focuses on Camus’s understanding of evil on three « registers »: ontological, political, and psychological (“After” 163; see also *Camus* 98-145). Gregory Hoskins, also a philosopher, argues that Camus delineates a « non-metaphysical, post-secular ethical and political anthropology and explanation of evil » (141). For his part, Robert Sutton, working in theology and philosophy of religion, proposes a dialectical, existential interpretation of the value of the unique human individual in the works of Camus and the words ascribed to Jesus.

This article examines how Camus reworks traditionally religious concepts to shape a modern literary antitheodicy. In so doing, I will demonstrate, he advances a certain aesthetic repair of the pain and injustice that are part of the fabric of worldly existence. As revealed here by a sampling of the various genres he explored (theater, novel, essay, notes), Camus proves « toujours partagé entre la douleur et la beauté » (IV.242). Approaching evil as a « puissance défaisante » of rupture and from an original nostalgia for unity, he binds the question to that of omnipotence (and hence God) (Pasqua 52; see 49-51, 54), as well as to art (as that which imagines unity in tension with rupture). I first draw in particular from *Le Malentendu* (1944), *La Peste*, and *Les Justes* (1949) to trace recurrent representation of the scandalous silence of God as underpinning the author’s ethics of revolt. In light of this foundational experience, I then hope to offer fresh insight into the ethical and aesthetic stakes of Camusian antitheodicy. Specifically, I contend that a productive, dialectical experience of pain and beauty animates Camus’s questioning of whether art can affect, contain, console, or even repair suffering – and this well before the conception of literature as « réparation » came to preoccupy the

contemporary French literary landscape (Gefen 20). Ultimately, I argue, this tension prevents Camus's project from collapsing into a poetic theodicy by other means.

### **An Empty Sky, Indicted: The Silence of God in Camus's Early Writings and *Le Malentendu***

A perceived silence of God catalyzes Camus's diagnosis of the absurdity of existence and the scandal of suffering as unintelligible and « inutile » (I.223). This concern dates back to pre-war inquiry into « the human condition » (I.306), whether in his brief “Dialogue de Dieu avec son âme” (1933), thesis on gnostic and Augustinian conceptions of evil (1936), or theatrical reworking and star role in André Gide's *Retour de l'enfant prodigue* (1938). Recurrent references to the sky – seat of a silent, unmoved, or inexistent God – metonymically figure existential and metaphysical solitude. *L'Envers et l'Endroit* (1937), with its « sourire niais indifférent du ciel » before an old man's solitude (I.44), and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), with its « ciel étouffant » promising no salvation (I.239), prefigure plague-ridden Oran and Cádiz, whose residents despair « seul[s] en face du ciel » « où [Dieu] se tait » (II.84, 122). Such symbolism harks back to a traumatic, interpretative primal scene (Lukacher 24), in which a young Camus and Max-Pol Fouchet witnessed a bus hit a Muslim boy. Fouchet recalls, « Camus s'arrêta. Il se tourna vers la mer et le ciel qui étaient démesurément bleus. Il me montra le ciel de la main, le ciel impassible, et il me dit: 'Tu vois, il se tait' » (21).

Pain is absurdity's « outburst [éclatement] », maintains Levinas, and indeed, Camus's key articulation of suffering's scandal remains the absurd (“La Souffrance” 109). Particularly in early works, characters experience *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*'s « exil [...] sans recours » « [qui] naît de cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde » (I.223, 238). In this way, Camus casts the absurd as, to quote Sartre, a metaphysical problem, « au sens de scandale et de déception » (1916). Alone on earth and facing death, Camusian characters – acutely in his early cycle of the absurd – experience the silence of a world devoid of transcendence as the sole response to the desire for meaning. This notion, bound up in the problem of evil, finds its clearest expression in the wartime play *Le Malentendu*. Here, a *fait divers* alluded to in *L'Étranger* (1942) takes on mythical proportions (I.187), with parodic echoes of such tales as the Prodigal Son, Christ, Mary and Martha, or Oedipus and Electra. After a long absence, a son returns home to surprise his mother and sister, innkeepers whose bleak lives he hopes to improve with his newfound fortune. Concealing his identity, Jan checks in, unrecognized. The women, who dream of escaping with stolen riches, subsequently drug and murder him. When his identity is finally revealed, the women commit suicide and the victim's desperate wife cries out in vain as the play ends.

Key in the conflict is the nameless old manservant. Like Jan, the reader/spectator gleans clues and learns that this curious character « entend mal » (I.466). Ironically, the servant's supposed inability to hear and/or understand well just as easily applies to any of the main characters, as suggested by the polysemic title. This « modern tragedy » likens the « Old Man » to a God whom characters insist is also stone-like, « sour[d] à tous les cris » (I.448, 496). Indeed, Camus's *Carnets* include comparable dialogue drafts and evidence of the author's intention: « renforcer le symbolisme » (II.961, cf. 974). These notes bolster readings such as that of Roger Quilliot, editor of the first Pléiade edition of Camus's corpus, who comparing them to another sketch of act three in the *Carnets*, remarks, « Servante taciturne ou vieillard silencieux, le sens de la pièce reste le même. L'homme est en exil et Dieu ne répond pas » (1781). Writing for the second Pléiade edition, David Walker, on the other hand, dismisses the rapprochement: « Ici le tragique [...] se manifestera par de simples accidents de parcours et il revêtira l'aspect banal de ce vieillard beckettien, que l'on aura tort de prendre pour Dieu, absent de cet univers de l'absurde » (I.1343). While Walker rightly points out the Beckettian nature of Camus's character, this comment overlooks the author's own insistence on the servant's symbolic charge in a play he envisioned subtitled *Dieu ne répond pas* and in a world in which any deity can only figure as absurd and unresponsive (II.961, 971, 973).

In critical scenes that seem to anticipate *Huis clos*, Jan « hésite », then rings his room's call bell (I.479). After an initial silence, the servant appears in the doorway. Jan excuses himself: « Je voulais savoir seulement si quelqu'un répondait » (I.479). But when the old man leaves, he adds, « La sonnerie fonctionne, mais lui ne parle pas. Ce n'est pas une réponse. (*Il regarde le ciel.*) Que faire? » (I.480). If the functional bell implies possible communication, the stage notes' emphasis that the servant « reste immobile et silencieux » undercuts this reading (I.479). With his gloss and desperate glance to the heavens, Jan registers the servant's response as a non-response and presence as an absence. He moreover stresses his own ironic, failed messianism and parodic sacrifice. These come to the fore in a scene of solitary supplication which implicitly casts Jan as a distraught savior about to consume the fatal draught (I.480), evoking the bitter cup Jesus prays to be spared from drinking in Gethsemane (e.g., Matt. 26.39). This passage thus stages *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*'s characterization of modernity's broken call-and-response mechanism. Its inscription, however, reflects a Lacanian model, in which « toute parole appelle réponse » and language is understood as « expression du désir d'être entendu, donc reconnu », as Geraldine Montgomery writes of language and recognition in *Le Malentendu* (Lacan 247; Montgomery, "Edipe" 437).

Though uncommunicative, the silent servant seems quite perceptive. He picks up and eventually hands over Jan's dropped passport to Martha, uncovering her victim brother's identity. Examining the play's genesis, we can note similar drafted details which likewise develop suspense about an eventual intervention on his part (Church 43). This

strange blend – silence/communication, passivity/agency – heightens the ambiguous ethical status of this character, whose God symbolism has not passed unremarked (e.g., Chavanes 120-22; Mino 76-78). Still, the implications merit further consideration, especially given the preoccupation with theodicy in Camus's early work established thus far. To what extent does the servant's comprehension of Jan's identity and the misunderstanding make him complicit, we might ask, particularly given indications that this murder is not the women's first? The symbolic interpretation set up by Camus's text and extratextual sources hence points to an essential problem for theodicy: is a passive Creator analogously implicated in human evil in this theater of situation, where even restraint from action constitutes an active ethical choice?

Like the Book of Job's deity, though, the servant does finally break his silence. When Jan's widow, Maria, beseeches God – « Entendez-moi [...]! Ayez pitié [...]! » – he appears. Again standing on the threshold, he delivers his first – and only – terse lines of the play: « Vous m'avez appelé? » Confused and distraught, she again cries for help, but « *d'une voix nette et ferme* », as the stage notes underscore, he replies « Non! », and the curtain closes (I.497). This striking ending crystallizes the layered misunderstandings upon which the drama is built: ontological (mistaken identities), linguistic (misheard speech), hermeneutic (misconstrued meaning), and even philosophical (mistaken or mismatched notions of what will ensure happiness). What is clear is that Maria's apostrophe and melodramatic string of imperatives and supplications come up against the play's final negation. This denial is weightier still given earlier indications that in the rare moments when the servant does speak, he communicates « l'essentiel » (I.466). Getting the last word, his character shuts down the play – and any hope for consolation or redemption.

*Le Malentendu's* metaphysical *no* mirrors *Le Mythe de Sisyphe's* post-metaphysical stance. Faced with an unintelligible world, Camus categorically refuses « l'évasion », whether literal or « philosophical » suicide (I.241, 247). Concerning the latter, he argues, « Le saut ne figure pas un extrême danger comme le voudrait Kierkegaard. Le péril au contraire est dans l'instant subtil qui précède le saut. Savoir se maintenir sur cette arête vertigineuse, voilà l'honnêteté, le reste est subterfuge » (I.253). Camus opts for an image that assumes one's limits, rather than attempting to move outside or beyond them: « Je veux savoir si je puis vivre avec ce que je sais et avec cela seulement », he affirms (I.246). Refusing, for instance, a mystical knowing in « not-knowing », he parts ways with metaphysical existentialists Lev Shestov and his disciple Benjamin Fondane, for whom Jobian revolt « represents the absurd prayer of despair » (Lucescu-Boutcher 84, 81). Acknowledging limits – without resignation – is, of course, the ontological and ethical experiment so many Camusian characters attempt to live out, « sans appel » (I.255).

**Revolt as a Post-War Ethico-Existential Response: Horizontal Transcendence in *La Peste* and *Les Justes***

In this « universe », « c'est-à-dire une métaphysique et une attitude d'esprit », that Camus's texts put forth, existence therefore appears without reason, un beholden to any transcendent redemptive source (I.226). Humans remain in the dark, and to their suffering, only silence responds. Camus's reflection on the silence of God engages a veritable *topos* of literature generally, and modern French literature in particular, with influential forerunners and contemporaries too numerous to explore here. An addition to the aforementioned Dostoevsky, though, two romantics merit mention: Gérard de Nerval, for his *Chimères* (1854), with its alienated "Christ aux Oliviers" reflecting on the death of God and its *soleil noir* symbol reworked by Camus (Nerval III.648-51, 645); and Alfred de Vigny, for his *Destinées* (1864), with its despair before the agony of the innocent and its revolt « maudi[sant] le silence de la divinité » (Camus III.86). Vigny's final poetic provocation in "Le Mont des Oliviers" calls for « le Juste » to counter God's muteness with steely silence (I.153), and Ivan Karamazov goes further still by leaping to the conclusion that everything is permitted (Camus III.107-113). In contrast, the Camusian hero refuses nihilism and meets the heavens' muteness with vocal action and attention directed at the surrounding world.

Indeed, faced with the scandalous situation *Le Malentendu* foregrounds, the writer's task for Camus is to denounce any silence which masks oppression and suppresses cries of distress. His 1939 series of articles for *Alger Républicain*, "Misère de la Kabylie", provides an early example.<sup>4</sup> As he exposes the system of injustice and condemns the economy of charity that keep the region's inhabitants famished, the journalist emphasizes his moral imperative: « je ne saurais passer sous silence », « l'existence de cette misère imposait qu'on en parlât » (IV.315, 335). Hence, naming and writing become acts of revolt, as intimated by the resonant « je voudrais faire justice », where the French expression for attacking a fallacious argument (*faire justice de*) points to the larger project of advancing social justice (IV.315). In the absence of « clear » outcry, the writer must speak out (II.401; cf. II.487, III.454): « il le faut bien », he asserts, later censuring popular, political, and papal silence in response to Jewish persecution, « Qui répondrait en ce monde à la terrible obstination du crime si ce n'est l'obstination du témoignage » (Préface 10).

In Camus's diegetic worlds, too, the just speak out in the space hollowed out by divine silence. This revolt is especially arresting in the allegorical novel *La Peste*, in which, like the journalist Camus, Doctor Rieux invokes testimony to justify his « chronicle »: « [il] décida alors de [...] ne pas être de ceux qui se taisent, pour témoigner en faveur de ces pestiférés, pour laisser du moins un souvenir de l'injustice et de la violence qui leur avaient été faites » (II.248). For, as Camus's theatrical adaptation of the novel maintains, silence collaborates with oppression. In *L'État de siège* (1948), the not-

so-subtly named Nada acknowledges that such a rule serves « le silence et la mort », a final solution to which totalitarianism tends (II.332). As the hero Diego learns, rising up and refusing despair « déchirent le silence », freeing the captive city (II.350).

Such revolt rejects theodicy and any Kierkegaardian leap or Pascalian wager of belief, famously embodied in *La Peste* by Father Paneloux, specifically in the Jesuit's two plague sermons which condemn and exhort the Oranais.<sup>5</sup> Suffering is neither merited nor redemptive in *La Peste*, as laid bare by the aforementioned narration of the death of Judge Othon's son, with its ironic cruciform imagery. As if to signal its importance, the poignant scene gathers all major characters around the boy to witness « l'agonie d'un innocent » « [qui] prit dans le lit dévasté une pose de crucifié grotesque » (II.181, 182). Like Maria's cry for mercy, Paneloux's prayer for intercession receives no response. Compelling accounts of this anguish fail, as the scene indicts any Creator whose handiwork and silence would permit « [l]e mal de la douleur [...] l'articulation la plus profonde de l'absurdité » (Levinas, "La Souffrance" 108-09).

In such a world, Rieux and his comrades engage instead in the work that a silent, passive God has ostensibly abandoned. Our hero's very name suggests a defiant Nietzschean laughter, *rire*, and as well as the absent God, *dieu*, whose healing work, solidarity with the suffering – and even omniscience (Ouellet 108) – the doctor claims. An anti-Maria, Rieux takes up *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*'s challenge of living out the absurd on the « arête vertigineuse », without certitude or consolation (I.253). « Je suis dans la nuit », the doctor admits in an intimate conversation with Tarrou (II.120). He thus stresses his epistemological and ontological limits and concentrates instead on the urgent task at hand – a position reinforced by this passage's careful play on light and darkness imagery (Ponnou-Delaffon).

Unlike Paneloux, whose public admonitions and private passion can be seen as bending before superior forces, the heroes Camus privileges resist time and again kneeling in passive resignation. Beyond the humanist paragon Rieux, more ethically fraught characters would concur with Camus's notes on *La Peste* that « La seule lâcheté est de se mettre à genoux... » (II.1004). We could cite Meursault's unwillingness to conform to socially prescribed roles, whether crying at his mother's funeral or repenting before the crucifix brandished before him, or the Russian revolutionary Kaliayev's refusal to betray his struggle by accepting « la grâce » authorities propose (III.37). Martha, too, rages against her imprisonment: « ici, [...] toute la terre est dessinée pour que le visage se lève et que le regard supplie. Oh! je hais ce monde où nous en sommes réduits à Dieu. Mais moi, [...] je ne m'agenouillerai pas » (I.491). If kneeling gestures toward submission and resignation, Sisyphus's « little narrative of everyday human resistance » figures arguably above all an archetype of unwillingness to yield (Carroll 64).

In different contexts, then, Camusian heroes exemplify revolt against silence, theodicy, and submission vis-à-vis an absurd existence. In light of the ethical predicament that complicates this existential and metaphysical one, *l'homme révolté camusien* shifts

emphasis toward human responsibility and solidarity. As Rieux humbly submits, ethical praxis points to the exit out of the aporia of theodicy: « peut-être vaut-il mieux pour Dieu qu'on ne croie pas en lui et qu'on lutte de toutes ses forces contre la mort, sans lever les yeux vers ce ciel où il se tait » (II.122). More surprising is Camus's reworking of traditional religious concepts such as transcendence, salvation, transfiguration, miracle, and grace to articulate his ethics of revolt, particularly in his post-war work. One important illustration is the seemingly oxymoronic « horizontal transcendence » “Remarque sur la révolte” (1945) posits six years before his mature political essay, *L'Homme révolté* (1951) (III.326). Horizontality is understandable imagery, given Camus's deep personal and aesthetic interest in the natural world and Algerian landscape, as well as the construction's critique of any claim to vertical otherworldliness. However, Camus's immanence, as Laurent Bove reminds us, cannot be reduced to « la pensée dialectique-athée du matérialisme historique » in vogue at this time (“La *Différence*” 25; IV.284). Valorizing the *hic et nunc*, it thus dovetails the assertion in *Noces* (1938), « Le monde est beau, et hors de lui, point de salut » (I.135), playing on the Church father's dictum « Hors de l'Eglise, point de salut », or in *L'Envers et l'Endroit*, « mon royaume est de ce monde » (I.71; II.799), a declaration of allegiance inverting Jesus' proclamation before Pilate (John 18.36).<sup>6</sup> But what then of transcendence, this curious metaphysical or religious remainder when embracing the worldly?

Horizontal transcendence, this « secular sacred, a form of transcendent or ultimate meaning to be discovered in this world, without reference to the supernatural », to borrow a term Pericles Lewis applies to the modernist novel (21), conjoins the human embraced in its fullness and its limits *and* an openness to others by which one surpasses the confines of the self (Lévi-Valensi 140). « [L]’affirmation de la révolte s’étend à quelque chose qui transcende l’individu, qui le tire de sa solitude supposée, et qui fonde une valeur » (III.325-26). This reaching toward a « something else », tentatively evoked by the indefinite pronoun and subsequent triple subjunctive, finds expression in *La Peste*, where Tarrou aspires to become a « saint sans Dieu » (II.211). Yet, while some read Tarrou as embodying the novel's « moral message » (Judt 176; Engel 74), it is rather Rieux's gentle correction that the text privileges – especially given that the narrative « eliminate[s] » Tarrou, whose notebooks and authorial voice Rieux subsumes (McCann 399). The doctor reorients transcendence back to the interpersonal, to being with the most abject persons, without hope of glory: « vous savez, je me sens plus de solidarité avec les vaincus qu’avec les saints. [...] Ce qui m’intéresse, c’est d’être un homme » (II.211). Tarrou's curious response, « Oui, nous cherchons la même chose, mais je suis moins ambitieux », precisely acknowledges the Camusian hero's more difficult task (II.211; see also Rey 95-97). Such pursuit of « sympathy » (e.g., II.210), « solidarity » (III.79), or the « strange love » necessary for revolt (III.322) traces a deep faith in the human. Rather than separate from the profane and immanent, this « sacré [...] à hauteur d’homme » signals « une valeur digne de respect absolu » (Lévi-Valensi 131; Weyembergh 66).



Kaliayev, from the historically-inspired play *Les Justes*, sheds further light on Camusian transcendence, as he works for what he believes to be justice, neither explicitly denying God nor placing any hope in divine deliverance. Imprisoned after assassinating the Grand Duke, the revolutionary prophesies a day when « [n]ous serons tous frères » (III.35). While more ethically problematic than Rieux, Kaliayev echoes the doctor: when his fellow inmate misreads this vision as « le royaume de Dieu », he retorts, « La justice est notre affaire! » (III.35). To illustrate his point, he recounts the legend of Saint Dmitri:

KALIAYEV. Il avait rendez-vous dans la steppe avec Dieu lui-même, et il se hâtait lorsqu'il rencontra un paysan dont la voiture était embourbée. Alors saint Dmitri l'aida. La boue était épaisse, la fondrière profonde. Il fallut batailler pendant une heure. Et quand ce fut fini, saint Dmitri courut au rendez-vous. Mais Dieu n'était plus là.

FOKA. Et alors ?

KALIAYEV. Et alors il y a ceux qui arriveront toujours en retard au rendez-vous parce qu'il y a trop de charrettes embourbées et trop de frères à secourir. (III.35)

Transposing religious categories into socialist terms to explain a coming « kingdom of humanity », Kaliayev narrates an ultimately ambiguous tale. Although service to one's neighbor appears an obstacle to the meeting, Judaism and Christianity have traditionally conceived of acts of justice (in Kaliayev's lexicon) and love (*agapē* in Saint Dmitri's) as a site for encountering and manifesting God in the world.<sup>7</sup> In spite of himself, then, the inset narrative and gloss invest the legend with a potentially radically different moral: when the saint was done, « God was no longer there », because the encounter, the transcendence, was precisely located in the concluded act: « La justice rendue à l'autre [...] me donne de Dieu une proximité indépassable », writes Levinas, in words our Russian revolutionary could have spoken ("Une Religion" 34). Of course, these texts question to what extent such a God, once reduced to pure ethical form, still proves relevant. Rieux and Kaliayev hint that if the divine or sacred as categories can be retained in a modern world marred by evil, they must be reconceptualized as encounter, and as in need of human agency, in an ethical-cum-spiritual transcendence within the horizontal axis Camus establishes.

To be clear, my point here is not to lend my voice to those who seek to redeem the writer by reading him as a crypto-Christian or pre-Christian on the cusp of conversion (on this tendency, see Gaetani). Camus engaged in a lifelong, thoughtful « dialogue » with religion, and Christianity in particular (II.471). He acknowledges being moved by and admiring the person of Jesus (IV.285) and often shares ethical and intellectual affinities with Christian thought (see, for instance, Blondeau and Sutton). Nevertheless, Camus's position on Christ's divinity is consistent (Spiquel 160): « Je n'ai que vénération et respect devant la personne du Christ [...]. Je ne crois pas à sa résurrection », he clarifies

after his *Discours de Suède* (IV.285), or again, in an interview near the end of his life, « J'ai le sens du sacré et je ne crois pas à la vie future, voilà tout » (IV.614). Moreover, his sustained critique of Christianity is not « only aimed at 'phantasmic Christianity [...], pathological in its otherworldliness' » (Whistler 59, generalizing a claim Cristaudo 154 applies to the author's thesis). For Camus, there is something more fundamentally troubling about a cornerstone Christian doctrine: « Le christianisme [...] est une doctrine de l'injustice. Il est fondé sur le sacrifice de l'innocent et l'acceptation de ce sacrifice » (*Camus* 178). This is neither an aside nor a minor distinction, for Camus's categorical rejection of recuperations of suffering inflects his conception of his craft as antitheodicy, to which I now turn.

### **Art and/as Repair: Camus's Literary Antitheodicy**

Critics have long debated whether writing can « translate » suffering (Delvaux and Dauge-Roth 3), or whether, as Elaine Scarry and Maurice Blanchot have questioned, some experiences of « pain » and « disaster » exceed language's communicative potentials (Scarry, *The Body*). Martine Delvaux and Alexandre Dauge-Roth push the question further: « L'écriture peut-elle toucher la souffrance ou seulement nous toucher? » (3). In other words, and as Alexandre Gefen explores in the contemporary context, if fiction holds empathetic force, or even duty, can it operate on the larger world? Certain literary approaches (like bibliotherapy), fields (literature and neuroscience), and moral philosophers (most famously Martha Nussbaum) would answer affirmatively.

Amidst the carnage of the twentieth century, Camus dares to imagine whether literature can affect, lessen, contain, or even redeem suffering. As we have seen, unmerited suffering which meets only silence catalyzes Camus's articulation of the absurd and of, in turn, revolt as the locus of a possible transcendence within this world, the latter positioning itself as a correction of the former. This path leads the artist to posit a possible aesthetic repair of suffering: « Parler répare », *L'Homme révolté* advances (III.68). As Gefen notes, even the modern secular literary notion of « réparation » can be understood in « sa pleine dimension religieuse », as the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world (258). Consciously committed writing partakes in revolt – by the ethical encounters it stages, testimonies it offers, injustices and silences it « fai[t] retentir par les moyens de l'art » (IV.240). It hence enacts Kaliyev's contention that poetry, too, is revolutionary (III.7). Furthermore, for Camus, who cannot hold original sin, whether in traditional theological or modern secular variations, responsible for evil (Sharpe, "After"), such writing strives to correct the « ignorance » and « thoughtlessness » at its root: « On ne pense pas mal quand on est meurtrier », he clarifies, « On est un meurtrier parce qu'on pense mal » (II.509-10). In this way, Camus anticipates by at least fifteen years Hannah Arendt's insistence on « the strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil » or « the problem of good and evil » as « connected with our

faculty of thought » (*Eichmann* 288; *Thinking* 5; cf. Judt 179-81).

In this struggle, Camus is aware that publishing participates in worldmaking, as Geoffroy de Lagasnerie asserts in *Penser dans un monde mauvais*: « écrire, c'est s'engager, » « contribuer à façonner le cours du monde » (26, 12). Camus's notes on « l'art et l'artiste qui refont le monde, mais toujours avec une arrière-pensée de protestation » find an echo in *L'Homme révolté* (II.1010): « La révolte [...] est fabricatrice d'univers » (III.280). Literature proves particularly powerful terrain for such « correction » (III.287) or « réparation » (II.486), for as his early *Carnets* advise, « On ne pense que par image. Si tu veux être philosophe, écris des romans » (II.800; cf. 1029). In this light, Camus's protagonists, refusing one creation, instantiate another. For instance, Rieux, himself a writerly figure, chronicles a Lukácian « epic of a world [...] abandoned by God » (88), as he illustrates what the *Carnets* embrace as a « littérature de concurrence » or « 'création contre Dieu' » (II.1005; cf. 184). The conjoining of religious and worldly categories in such a « sainte révolte », reminiscent as well of Tarrou and Diego, calls to mind Camus's inscription in his *Carnets* of a quotation by Jacques Maritain (II.349): « 'La sainteté aussi est une révolte: c'est refuser les choses telles qu'elles sont. C'est prendre sur soi le malheur du monde' » (IV.1072).

If art-as-correction for Camus aspires by its ethical impulse to take seriously the absurd, denounce evil, and contest theodicy, it nonetheless suggests aesthetically the possibility of a certain transcendence of suffering that approaches consolation. In a volume on literature and theodicy, Rudolf Freiburg and Susanne Gruss theorize art as effecting solace or sublimation whereby « [p]ainful experience [...] is transformed into something lasting, efficient, occasionally beautiful » (21). Indeed, for the nonreligious thinker and writer that Camus is, therein lies the elusive redemptive power of literature, or at least a certain French classical ideal thereof. In its beauty and the form it lends to devastation, the work of art « crée [...] le salut », advances Camus boldly in *L'Homme révolté*, again with recourse to religious vocabulary: « Nommer le désespoir, c'est le dépasser » (III.287). Commenting on Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, he underscores the novel's « tone », which he maintains « postule qu'une certaine force de l'âme peut poser des bornes au malheur en censurant son expression » (I.899). For Camus, art must account for and respond to « la douleur des hommes », « [la] maîtris[ant] par les règles de l'art », containing it by art's form, reshaping it through language, and « transfigur[ing] » it by means of beauty and style (I.900, 898). Yet, clear-eyed, the « Absurd creator cannot fall prey to the mystification of art [...] since he/she knows that art is limited, that it too provides no escape » (Carroll 60). There is certainly no mystification here; Camus's non-fiction and fiction remind us that, as *La Peste*'s Tarrou acknowledges, we at best strive to be a « meurtrier innocent » (II.210). However, the tension in Camus's view of art merits more nuance. As the absurd artist speaks out against metaphysical silence and recasts suffering in revolt, getting the last word so to speak even beyond personal pain and death (III.291), his position reflects the « complex emotional coupling of hope and despair »

which Amir Engel identifies in post-war cultural productions (68).

Following Sami Pihlström's work on antitheodicy's dialectics, I propose in conclusion to take seriously the question of whether Camus's antitheodicy and theory of aesthetic repair ultimately free themselves from the grips of theodicy. Or, does such a Camusian ethical poetics point instead to a « meta-level picture of harmonious meaningfulness », « a kind of reconciliation with the absurd world of suffering and pain even when it claims to reject all reconciliatory attempts », as Pihlström fears of antitheodicy more generally (482)? That is to say, we should think through antitheodicy not only as an oft-noted theme within the writer's work (e.g., as when Schlüter's chapter on Camus and theodicy in Freiburg and Gruss's volume centers on Paneloux's sermon sequences). We should also consider its stakes for the larger writing project of literature-as-reparation, including Camus's understanding of revolt (« Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux » [I.304]), meaning (« C'est à l'homme de se fabriquer une unité » [II.969]), and correction (« le roman [...] crée [...] la forme et le salut » [III.287]).

There are, I submit, no easy answers to these questions. Instead, Pihlström calls for a self-critical stance, a bulwark against the « temptation » of « theodicy by other means » (485, 488). It is, I would contend, in such a humble, self-reflective position that Camus navigates this tension, for instance in his fidelity to epistemic humility and openness with which we began (e.g., II.470, 473). We also find evidence of such honest, continual self-reflection in common threads running through the author's corpus, such as his cautions against abstraction, of which Hitlerian « mathematics » mark an extreme example (III.390). To combat this force that obscures « la beauté du monde et des visages » (II.437), Camus marshals, as Vincent Grégoire has shown, literary strategies to « faire appel à l'imagination des lecteurs » (42). His texts also mobilize an ethics of concentration (e.g., as advocated by Tarrou [II.209]) and of neo-Hellenic moderation (« la mesure » [III.319-20]), while guarding against any hope that would signal resignation (I.126).

Not, then, a poetic theodicy by another name, Camusian art remains true to the experience of the absurd, while participating in sense-making in a world devoid of predetermined meaning. Indeed, for Camus, the artist is the highest example of « l'homme absurde » who creates an art that is freely given: « Travailler et créer 'pour rien', [...] c'est la sagesse difficile que la pensée absurde autorise » (I.297). This same gesture lies at the heart of Kaliayev's definition of love: « tout donner, tout sacrifier sans espoir de retour » (III.29; IV.1264). Careful to dismiss all attempts to recuperate, justify, or lend meaning to evil and suffering in the name of a certain value, purpose, or end – whether theological, philosophical, historical, political, or artistic – Camus remains, he notes in his Nobel acceptance speech, « toujours partagé entre la douleur et la beauté » (IV.242). Such a view reflects an inherent « déchirement » « entre refus et consentement » (Devette 254). As he develops in “Révolte et art” in *L'Homme révolté*, such is the artist's position:

« Aucun artiste ne tolère le réel », dit Nietzsche. Il est vrai; mais aucun artiste ne peut se passer du réel. La création est exigence d'unité et refus du monde. [...]

[L'homme] ne peut affirmer la laideur totale du monde. Pour créer la beauté, il doit en même temps refuser le réel et exalter certains de ses aspects. L'art conteste le réel, mais ne se dérobe pas à lui. (III.278, 282; cf. IV.240, 260)

Still, if the artist is torn between pain and beauty, the latter, insofar as it is aesthetic and ethical, inspiration and guide, can offer a way through the former: « La Beauté, qui aide à vivre, aide aussi à mourir » (IV.1062). Would this reader of Dostoevsky concur with Prince Myshkin, the ironic, eponymous hero of *The Idiot* who madly – or prophetically, in Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's reading – suggested that « 'beauty will save the world' » (Dostoevsky 382)? Camus certainly seems to view his craft as participating in the repair of the world, offering a beauty that Augustine names in *De Musica* « a plank amid the waves of the sea » (qtd. in Scarry, *On Beauty* 24). If « aesthetic fairness » spurs us on to « ethical fairness », as Elaine Scarry contends, following such philosophers as Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, Camus through his prose « recommits us to [...] care », « prepares us for justice » (*On Beauty* 109, 78): « La beauté, sans doute, ne fait pas les révolutions », recognizes Camus, « Mais un jour vient où les révolutions ont besoin d'elle. [...] Peut-on, éternellement, refuser l'injustice sans cesser de saluer la nature de l'homme et la beauté du monde ? Notre réponse est oui » (III.299).

Concluding his comparison of Jesus' and Camus's engagement with evil, Sutton asserts, « Theology in general and theodicy in particular has yet to create a human image which combines the agony, which accompanies the consciousness of certain death, with the sheer joy of existence and a love of life » (164). For Camus – acutely conscious of suffering, pain, and finitude while passionately defending happiness, pleasure, and the world and Mediterranean he loved so – pain and beauty are, in contrast, never an either/or. Rather than identify a philosophical « contradiction » between, on the one hand, love of the world experienced as immanent plenitude in early works like *Noctes* and *L'Envers et l'Endroit* and, on the other, his conception of the absurd and the world as rupture in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Bove, *Albert* 49n137), we might detect a dynamic tension which animates the author's work. This tolerance for tension is already palpable in the affirmation with which we began, « Je ne crois pas à Dieu et je ne suis pas athée » (IV.1197). The need to strive to live out experiences of both pain and beauty, faithful to each, appears as an « epiphany » to the young Camus while visiting the Cloister of the Dead at Florence's Santissima Annunziata Church (Gay-Crosier 162): « C'est ma révolte qui a raison, et cette joie qui est comme un pèlerin sur la terre, il me faut la suivre pas à pas » (II.830). Similarly, this admirer of René Char cites *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, a collection inflected by the poet's participation in the Resistance: « En plein combat, les armes encore à la main, voici un poète qui a osé nous crier: 'Dans nos ténèbres, il n'y a pas une

place pour la Beauté. Toute la place est pour la Beauté' » (II.767). Or, to let Camus's lyrical prose from "Retour à Tipasa" have the final word, « Au milieu de l'hiver, j'apprenais enfin qu'il y avait en moi un été invincible » (III.613).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, parenthetical references to the most recent edition of Camus's *Œuvres complètes* appear as Volume. Page.

<sup>2</sup> And yet, Camus, who examines the Bishop of Hippo's writings in his university thesis *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme*, saw himself as « maintain[ing] a special 'fidelity' » to his fellow North African (Lottman 690n5), whom he considered « [l]e seul grand esprit chrétien qui ait regardé *en face* le problème du mal » (II.1069).

<sup>3</sup> For Camus, evil permeates language, too, posing « une question métaphysique » (I.901). He cites Brice Parain, for whom « 'accuser notre langage d'être l'instrument du mensonge et de l'erreur' » is tantamount to accusing « 'le monde d'être mauvais, Dieu d'être méchant' » (I.902). *La Chute* (1956) and its development of Camus's thinking on human innocence and duplicity certainly come to mind here. These questions, however, exceed the scope of the present article.

<sup>4</sup> For an extended analysis in the context of a Camusian « souci des autres », see Morisi 37-63.

<sup>5</sup> For extended readings, see Sharpe, *Camus* 118-25 and Schlüter.

<sup>6</sup> « [T]here is no salvation out of the Church », from Cyprian of Carthage's seventy-second epistle, "To Jubaianus, Concerning the Baptism of Heretics" (384, section 21). Camus would have been familiar with this maxim, if only from his adaptation of Gide's *Retour de l'enfant prodigue*, in which the brother proclaims, « Hors la Maison, point de salut pour toi » (163).

<sup>7</sup> The Hebrew *tzedakah*, from the root for justice, *tzedak*, is often translated as charity. In the Christian tradition, *caritas*, as both practice/service and virtue/loving-kindness toward others, reflects the God defined as love (1 John 4.16) and provides a site for experiencing God in the world (e.g., as according to the traditional Gregorian hymn, "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est"). We should recall that, after the absurd and revolt, love was to be the theme around which Camus organized his third cycle of works (IV.1245).

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