

The Tender Indifference of the World: Camus' Theory of the Flesh

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This paper seeks to show that a deep strand running through Camus' thinking and writing is what could be termed Camus' own theory of 'flesh', comparable in its function and its scope to Merleau-Ponty's famous notion. As is well known, in Merleau-Ponty the metaphor of 'the flesh' first serves ontological and epistemological purposes. It is supposed to characterise what Merleau-Ponty thinks is the actual mode of access to physical and symbolic worlds. Beyond its primary ontological purpose, Merleau-Ponty's writings also explore the political and aesthetic implications of the notion. In this article, I attempt to show that Camus' absurdist stance contained as its other side a positive ontological and epistemological position, comparable to Merleau-Ponty's. I try to unveil this other side of the absurd in Camus' early prose. In these texts, Camus' unique version of sensualism comes to light most strikingly, as an indissolubly ontological and literary vision. That vision traverses Camus' novels, and gives them much of their poetic force.

Merleau-Ponty's Flesh as Philosophical Model

The metaphoric paradigm of the 'flesh' can be interpreted as Merleau-Ponty's solution to the transcendental programme bequeathed by Kant to modern philosophy. The transcendental puzzle concerns the problem of accounting for the certainty of some fundamental rational facts (theoretical truths uncovered by the sciences and practical truths accessible to moral conscience), given that the world, to which those facts of reason relate, appears to be ontologically antithetical to human reason. Merleau-Ponty's own solution to the transcendental inquiry takes place in a line of answers that was opened up

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by Hegel, and is based on a rejection of the way in which Kant had defined the terms of his transcendental problem. The transcendental inquiry is radically transformed as soon as one realises that it is a mistake to posit human intentionality and world, subject and object, as two separate poles. Rather than trying to construct their possible links, a task that becomes inextricably fraught when their separation is posited as the starting premise, philosophy's task should consist in reconstructing the different levels at which the two poles are always already united.¹ Rather than asking how the *relata* relate to each other, one should aim to show how different types of relation (accessed in perception, in epistemic and practical judgement, in aesthetic appraisal, and so forth) produce different types of *relata*.²

Following the Hegelian insight, Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" is anything but an empiricist version of Kant's transcendental subject, or, to mention a later incarnation of the Kantian subject more directly related to Merleau-Ponty, of Husserl's intentionality. Rather, the flesh is the element in which subject and object are already united because, as their element, both participate in it. To be slightly more specific about this obscure sounding metaphor, we could say that Merleau-Ponty's late theory of the flesh results from the following argument: the *Phenomenology of Perception* showed that the affective intentionality of the body schema, by replicating the external structures of the world and responding to their diverse appeals, is the key to the transcendental answer. Motility, as the action of a body responding to the world's features, explains our pre-reflexive access to the world, on the basis of which all further elaborated forms of intentionality (theoretical and practical) can develop. In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty adds that this truth only goes half way and needs to be completed by its other, 'objective' half: the body can achieve this replication and response within to the world without only because the world without somehow is already at the same ontological level, is already within the same element, as the world within. Vision and touch are therefore not just subjective forms of intentionality reaching out for a world outside. The visible and the tangible need to be thought of rather as absolute qualities of reality, arising from the meaningful structuredness of the world. They can be thought of independently of sentient organisms. Sentient organisms simply bring to a point of explicit expression these qualities of the world, but can do so only by participating in them. It is as though in sensuous experiences, the world was recoiling upon itself, says Merleau-Ponty, notably at this particularly sensitive and reflexive fold that is the human body. In that deep ontological sense, it can be said that the world itself is a metaphorical form of flesh, a structured interlocking of perspectives, and the sharing of the flesh as general element explains the primordial unity of subject and object:

If (the body) touches and sees the things, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh.³

¹ See the passage on dialectic in Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1968), 89–95.

² Within the extensive literature dedicated to this topic, one reference can be singled out for the clarity in which it presents the Hegelian alternative: Paul Redding, *Hegel's Hermeneutics*, Cornell University Press, 1996.

³ *The Visible and the Invisible*, 137.

Post-Hegelian Sensualist Tradition

Merleau-Ponty's defining philosophical gesture therefore is to interpret the fundamental Hegelian insight of the full immanence of the subjective and objective poles, in a 'sensualist', rather than a rationalist manner, as being primordially unveiled in perception and action, rather than through conceptual articulation. This way of interpreting the Hegelian line of transcendental inquiry, in turn, has its own history. It can be named the 'sensualist' strand in this tradition, following the proposal of its main initiator, Ludwig Feuerbach. As is apparent, 'sensualism' here does not refer to an empiricist epistemological position premised upon a dualistic division between subject and object. Rather the sensualist strand in post-Hegelianism starts from the premise of the immanent unity of the subjective and the objective poles, and simply emphasises the naturalistic origins and modes of expression of this unity, against what it perceives as Hegel overly rationalistic interpretation. This article argues that Camus' thinking takes place within this tradition, and that locating his thought in this way provides a useful background to account for the philosophical and poetic power of his writings. The following quote from Feuerbach's *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* gives a good sense of the direction and scope of the sensualist strand in post-Hegelian philosophy:

Only a real being recognises real objects... From this result the following categorical imperatives: Desire not to be a philosopher, as distinct from man; be nothing else than a thinking man. Do not think as a thinker, that is, with a faculty torn from the totality of the real human being and isolated for itself; think as a living and real being, as one exposed to the vivifying and refreshing waves of the world's oceans. Think *in existence, in the world* as a member of it, not in the vacuum of abstraction as a solitary monad, as an absolute monarch, as an indifferent, superworldly God; then you can be sure that your ideas are unities of being and thought... You elevate yourself to an object only by lowering yourself to be an object for others. You think only because your ideas themselves can be thought, and they are true only when they pass the test of objectivity, that is, when they are acknowledged by another person apart from you for whom they are an object. *You see only as you yourself are a visible being*, and you feel only as you yourself are a perceptible being. The world stands open only to an open mind, and *the openings of the mind are the senses only* (emphasis mine).⁴

The anticipation in this text of Merleau-Ponty's 'chiasmatic' scheme, that is, the idea that we can see and touch the world only because the world, as it were, sees and touches us, is striking. Feuerbach's use of the metaphor of 'openness', as the ground of intentional life, is also directly reminiscent of the author of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Equally, Feuerbach's call to the thinker to be a 'living and real being', 'exposed' to the full experiential diversity of the world reminds strongly of Camus' discussion of the absurd artist or thinker in the *Myth of Sisyphus*. As we will see in a moment, this 'imperative', the paradoxical lesson of the experience of the absurd, is also arrived at in positive fashion in the affective experiences of the world of Camus' youth, in particular

⁴ *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, #51, trans. M. Vogel (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), 67–68.

experiences of the harsh Algerian landscape. The conclusion of Camus' most famous philosophical treatise, that life must be lived to the full precisely because it has no meaning, receives another, 'sensuous' grounding in Camus' short poetic prose.⁵

Before we look at this, however, let us note that the 'sensualist' framework does more than just establish an alternative position in metaphysics and epistemology. It begins as a transcendental inquiry aiming to account for the conditions of possibility of the key modes by which the human being relates to the world, and thus unveils the grounds for theoretical, practical and aesthetic judgements. By doing so, the inquiry moves into anthropological considerations: the transcendental answer says something about the specificity of the human, by contrast with, but also in relation to, other natural beings. And such anthropological considerations contain inherent normative implications: definitions of reason and other human capacities, and of correct and incorrect ways of using them. Moral and political implications, which denounce historical and social forms in which these capacities appear truncated or alienated, are also inextricably linked to this philosophical definition of human nature. Camus' own theory of the flesh contains specific answers to each of those questions.

***L'Étranger* as Ontological Treatise**

A well-known passage in Camus' work in which the sensuous strand is particularly evident is the last page of *L'Étranger*. As we know, this moment takes place straight after the moment of revolt, where Meursault considers the meaning of his life and the meaning of his upcoming death. Let us quote this passage at length, as it provides a good introduction into Camus' 'sensualism': 'Once he was gone, I felt calm again. I was exhausted and threw myself onto my bunk. I think I must have fallen asleep because I woke up with stars on my face'.⁶

We can note already that Camus writes literally, 'with stars on my face', 'avec des étoiles sur le visage'. This lack of mediation between stars and skin, as we will see in a moment, is typical of Camus' sensualism.

From that moment onwards, Meursault is reconciled with the world. This reconciliation, however, is not initially a moral or intellectual one. It is first and foremost an experience of immersion in the sensuous qualities of the world. These qualities intermingle in one general smell of the nightly world, which creates an overall affect (a 'marvellous peace') at the surface of the skin that penetrates the self: 'Sounds of countryside were wafting in. Smells of night, earth and salt were cooling my temples. The wondrous peace of this sleeping summer flooded into me like a tide'.⁷ Beyond mere semantic accuracy, the English translation cannot do full justice to the soft prosody of

⁵ As well as in his first, unpublished, novel, *A Happy Death*. Space does not permit to include this text, but many passages in it would fit the analyses that follow.

⁶ 'Lui parti, j'ai retrouvé le calme. J'étais épuisé et je me suis jeté sur ma couchette. Je crois que j'ai dormi parce que je me suis réveillé avec des étoiles sur le visage'. *L'Étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 182–83. I am using the translation by Joseph Laredo (Penguin, 1982 for the first edition) as a basis, but at times also the Stuart Gilbert translation. I alter both translations substantially to try and give a sense of the syntactic twists operated by Camus. For all their merits, the English translations tend to normalise Camus' style.

⁷ 'Des bruits de campagne montaient jusqu'à moi. Des odeurs de nuit, de terre et de sel rafraîchissaient mes tempes. La merveilleuse paix de cet été endormi entrain en moi comme une marée'.

the original sentences. The sense of 'peace' and appeasement is captured in simple words, concretely rendered in the balanced tempo of the syntactic groups, the assonances (notably the alternating between the acute 'é' and the muted 'è' sounds), and the all-important alliteration in 'm', which encompasses in one sound what were probably the two most highly charged words in Camus' affective and poetic system: *la mer* and *la mère*. Just as the book had started, with the thought of the mother, the book will end with her as well. But this thought opens up onto a form of experience that far outstretches the biographical and the psychological:

At that point, at the border of the night, some sirens started to scream. They were announcing departures to a world that was now for ever indifferent to me. For the first time in a very long time, I thought of mother. I felt that I understood why at the end of her life she'd taken a 'fiancé', why she'd pretended to start again. There at the home, where lives faded away, there too dusk was like a melancholic truce. So close to death, mother must have felt liberated and ready to relive everything. No one, no one at all had any right to cry over her. And I too, felt ready to relive everything. As if that great outburst of anger had purged the disease from me, had emptied me from hope, facing this night heavy with signs and stars, I opened myself up for the first time to the tender indifference of the world.⁸

The last sentence tells us that we find here the account of a revelation. A deep truth is revealed to Meursault after the movement of revolt. This moment of truth is linked to an experience of opening or 'openness', an opening to the world. Camus uses the very notion we noted earlier as being central in the sensualist model. We also remark that this passage contains two repetitions: of 'indifference', and of 'world'. Camus was too careful a writer to choose these repetitions without reason. Repetitions in classical French *stylistique* are considered a fault, to be systematically avoided. In fact, as I will now try to show, the repetition of these two key terms goes right to the heart of an emphasis on the flesh, as the key mediation between self and world.

'World' has two meanings in this text. It designates firstly the human, social world, the world of the Heideggerian '*das Man*'; and it designates also the phenomenological world, as the horizon in which are articulated all the different layers of meaning. Imminent death and the realisation of absurd truth detach Meursault from the world of *das Man*. This is the first indifference. The absurd man has become indifferent to everyday concerns and objects. The second indifference is no longer human. This time, it is the reciprocal (chiasmatic) indifference of the world itself. We could say that this indifference of the world is simply the other side of the coin. Camus' well-known definition of the absurd is that it is a relation between human striving for unity, and the world's lack of responsiveness. Interpreted from the perspective of the absurd, the 'indifference of the world' is that pole of the relation that objects to human efforts at sense and unity. But the world here is not the absurd world discussed in the *Myth of Sisyphus* (or at least not as it is discussed at the beginning of that book). The indifference of the world here is not rebuking, or challenging; it is the exact opposite: it is a *tender* indifference. Why does Camus call

⁸ *L'Étranger*, 183–84.

the indifference of the world ‘tender’? Why this oxymoron, all the more puzzling when viewed from the perspective of the absurd?

The Tender Indifference of the World

The text gives the answer to that question: the indifference of the world is not tender in and of itself, but for the human being, once the human being has acknowledged that indifference, and acknowledged it in a very specific sense: namely, by ‘opening himself to it’. Earlier in the paragraph, the moment of reversal, from revolt to appeasement, already occurred through such opening. Literally the text there said: ‘the wondrous peace of this sleeping summer *entering* the subject like a tide’. The world’s indifference becomes tender once it is accepted and as this acceptance allows for a recognition of the sublime features of that world.

The text shows that this acceptance and recognition are not intellectual attitudes. Camus’ position could be mistaken as being akin to the classical ethical positions of the Greek philosophers, one he might have learnt to appreciate during his work for his dissertation on “Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism”. In fact, the acceptance and recognition of the world’s inhuman beauty occur through sensuous experience, not through moral reasoning.⁹ Already the sensuous notations in the passage from *L’Etranger* pointed to an experience where the human subject lets himself be overwhelmed by the world’s qualities. The stars are directly on the skin. The noises of the earth and the smell of the sea surround the temples and penetrate the self. If we read through Camus’ poetic prose, we realise that this was in fact a paradigmatic experience for him: an experience of sensuous overwhelming, where the subject dissolves by letting the world’s overpowering qualities overtake his identity. The early poetic prose and travel writings of the 1930s are particularly evocative in that respect. The opening text of *Nuptials at Tipasa*, for instance, establishes most clearly the central significance of sensuous obliteration, when the writer finds himself at the heart of nature, as in the following passage:

Those who need myths are indeed poor. Here the gods serve as beds or as bearings as the day races across the sky. I describe and say: ‘This is red, this blue, this green. This is the sea, the mountain, the flowers’. Need I mention Dionysus to say that I love to crush mastic bulbs under my nose? Is the old hymn that will come later to me quite spontaneously even addressed to Demeter: ‘Happy is he alive who has seen these things on earth’? To see, to see on this earth: how can we forget that lesson? All that was required at the mysteries of Eleusis, was to watch. Yet even here, I know that I shall never come close enough to the world. I must be naked and dive into the sea, still scented with the perfumes of the earth, wash the former in the latter, and consummate upon my skin the embrace for which sun and sea, lips to lips, have so long been sighing. Once in the water, it is a shock, the rise of a thick, cold glue, a dive with ears ringing, nose streaming and a bitter mouth – swimming, arms shining with water now outside the sea, flashing in the sunlight

⁹ Against the opposition that has just been suggested, one could in fact show a direct link between the grand visions of Hellenistic pantheism Camus studied in his dissertation and the “sensualism” of his early prose.

and folded in a twist of all muscles; the stream of water along my body, that tumultuous possession of the waves by my legs – and the horizon disappears. On the beach, a fall onto the sand, given over to the world, concentrating on the weight of my flesh and bones, drunk with sunlight.¹⁰

In this text, the body is explicitly described as the point at which the sky, the sun, and the sea come together. The human body dissolves under the aggressive power of the elements; at the same time though it brings these elements together and lets an experience of the world as world emerge. The comparison with Merleau-Ponty seems irresistible. The same structure of experience is at play: an experience of seeing that is not undergone from an idealistic perspective, but in which rather the subject discovers its presence to the world and thereby reveals the world itself, or, we might say, reveals the world to itself. This is an experience of fundamental transcendental revelation, of the originary phenomenological moment: we reach here the level of immanence at which can be found the way to 'the things themselves'. A few pages later, Camus writes: 'it was neither I nor the world that counted, but solely harmony and silence, which, between it and me, gave birth to love'.¹¹ The passage confirms beyond doubt the decisive anti-idealistic stance taken by Camus, his embrace of an "immanentist" vision. The final note in that passage also confirms that, as for Merleau-Ponty and indeed for the writers sharing the same philosophico-poetic sensibility, the phenomenological revelation harbours crucial aesthetic and moral lessons.

The passage from *Nuptials* already gives clues as to the specific features of Camus' sensualism. Through impersonal expressions ('*il me faut être nu*'), depersonalised passive participles at the limit of syntactical correction, and through the constant mixing up or the erasing of the clauses' grammatical subjects, Camus in this passage insists on the paradoxical nature of this experience for him. The revelation of the world, as it is described here, seems to demand an overcoming of the subjective perspective, that is, the abandonment of the reference to a centre of experience and the relinquishing of conscious control. Experience is decentred, appears to denote absolute qualities of the world ('*c'est le saisissement*', etc). Language is paratactic, impersonal, as though it aimed to be as elementary as the natural forces it names. In this respect, Camus' brand of sensualism as it is announced here would appear to contrast sharply with Merleau-Ponty's, since for the latter subjective intentionality remains key. Following these initial remarks, it is worthwhile pursuing the comparison with Merleau-Ponty to highlight the most salient features of Camus' sensualism.

Transcendental Sensuous Experience

In Merleau-Ponty, the primary quality of the world opened up by sensuous experience is its inherent, objective structuredness: the fact that there is a high and

¹⁰ *Nuptials at Tipasa*, in Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. E. C. Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 68. I have substantially amended the translation to give a sense of the way in which Camus depersonalises the depiction of bodily experiences, by avoiding the use of pronouns and adjectives that would denote the first person perspective.

¹¹ *Nuptials at Tipasa*, 72.

a low, that things appear in between a foreground and a background, that objects have their perspectives, and so on. The late notion of the Visible captures these primordial aspects. The immanentist interpretation of this view of the world as a structure of structures explains why for Merleau-Ponty the key dimension of the 'flesh' is depth. Bodies and things owe their specificity to an ontological thickness, which is, however, extracted from the general thickness of being. It is the sharing of this general depth that provides the ground for the manifold interactions between things and objects.

These Cartesian aspects of the Visible¹² are in tension with another dimension of sensuous experience, namely the vitalistic nature of the interactions underpinning the world's structures, captured in the dynamic concept of the 'chiasm'. Merleau-Ponty's 'chiasm' designates a type of interaction that is intrinsically libidinal, a relationship of reciprocal projections/introjections. In this Merleau-Ponty is again directly reminiscent of Feuerbach who already insisted on the dialectic of activity and passivity, of action and 'suffering' in his sensualist rendering of the transcendental relation.¹³ The fundamental image of interaction in Merleau-Ponty is of mutual penetration: the world's features and structures enter the self, as the body schema replicates them. But this replication, by grounding intentional activity, gives meaning to the non-human features of the world. The non-human takes on anthropomorphic dimensions. Animals and humans discover their shared ontological status.¹⁴ The human subject's sensitivity 'lines up' not only organic structures, but inanimate things as well: the I projects itself in them and gives them dimensions of the intentional body.

In Camus, by contrast, the world initially discovered in sensuous experience is primitive and formless, the overpowering vastness of the elements. Rather than well-delineated shapes, structured lines or moving organisms, Camus' privileged objects of experience are overwhelming, anonymous forces that brutally invade the self and annihilate all consciousness: the sun that blinds and fills the head in *L'Étranger's* most famous scene; the heat that saps all energy¹⁵; the sea that fills the mouth¹⁶; the wind that blows right through the body and 'scatters' the self 'to the four corners of the earth'.¹⁷ In a paradigmatic image, the 'unfaithful wife' in the first story of *Exile and Kingdom* lets herself be penetrated by the cold and windy starry night. To pursue the classical reference, we might say that it is a Pascalian rather than a Cartesian world. Even in Florence, in what for European writers has traditionally been the very

¹² The surprising yet uninterrupted importance of Cartesian tropes within Merleau-Ponty's vitalistic phenomenology is well illustrated in *Eye and Mind*, his final text, in which a whole chapter is dedicated to Descartes' optics. See *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 2003), 290–324.

¹³ See L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. G. Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 59–64.

¹⁴ See *The Visible and the Invisible*, 152–55, as well as Merleau-Ponty's 1957 lecture course, reproduced in *Nature*, trans. R. Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ See the oppressive atmosphere in *The Growing Stone*, the last story in *Exile and Kingdom*.

¹⁶ See the passage quoted above from *Nuptials at Tipasa*.

¹⁷ *The Wind at Djemila*, in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 73–79: 'rubbed against for so long by the wind, shaken for more than an hour, staggering from resistance to it, I lost consciousness of the pattern my body traced. Like a pebble polished by the tides, I was polished by the wind, worn through to the very soul. I was a portion of the great force on which I drifted, then much of it, then entirely it, confusing the throbbing of my own heart with the great sonorous beating of this omnipresent natural heart'.

image of classical, proportional beauty, Camus concentrates on the formless expanse of the Tuscan landscape, the great unity of the sky, the wind and the earth.¹⁸

When he focuses on particular objects, Camus' descriptions do not consider them in terms of well-defined shapes or qualities. Rather, the descriptions focus on objects in the process of merging with their environment: sprawling flowers that invade their surroundings with their colour and scent¹⁹; ripe fruits whose juice runs out onto the face²⁰; melting ice. The qualities that are privileged in the description are colour and smell, which typically escape the contours of objects, even as they help identify them.

The only objects that escape this general rule are the stones, which recur as an obsessive motif in Camus' descriptions of natural environments.²¹ But of course the stone is itself an elemental kind of object, mostly named in the undifferentiated singular ('*la pierre*'); and Camus never dwells on the stones' specific qualities, not even their colour. It is as though the mere mention of the name was sufficient to evoke an obdurate reality stronger than human reality. Sisyphus' famous rock is thus not just a random metaphorical object in Camus' philosophico-poetic system. Rocks and stones that crush the human being's shoulders embody in their very sensuous quality the overpowering force of nature: they are not just a symbol of meaningless tasks but literal embodiments of humankind's essential frailty.²²

As was already noted the type of interaction that corresponds to this view of nature is one of utter dissolution of body and mind. The significance of this kind of interaction is actually complex and manyfold. In general terms, it is clear that Camus sees the experience of dissolution at the hand of nature as a cleansing, spiritual and moral experience. Sometimes, the experience has overt hedonistic traits, notably when it is coupled with a direct or metaphorical sexual dimension.²³ The spiritual value of these experiences is to return to some 'truth of the body'. Camus' tone in such passages is explicitly Nietzschean. More frequently, the experience of annihilation is harsher. What is described is a brutal cathartic process, as though Camus entrusted the violence of nature to rid him of false hopes and chimerical ideas. Hence, Camus' favourite metaphor was of the 'desert', as 'desert of thought' and as existential desert, to describe the difficult journey through a harsh landscape one must undergo metaphorically and literally, in order to do good philosophy and make the right life decisions.²⁴ What is

¹⁸ *The Desert*, in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 103.

¹⁹ For instance: 'We enter a blue and yellow world and are welcomed by the pungent, odorous sigh of the Algerian summer earth. Everywhere, pinkish bougainvillea hangs over villa walls... After a few steps, the smell of absinthe seizes one by the throat. Their grey wool covers the ruins as far as the eye can see. Its oil ferments in the heat, and the whole earth gives off a heady alcohol that makes the sky flicker... The thick scent of aromatic plants tears at the throat and suffocates in the vast heat', *Nuptials at Tipasa*, 65–66.

²⁰ *Nuptials at Tipasa*, 69.

²¹ In the already quoted passage from *The Desert*, we find this exemplary expression: 'a stone amongst stones'.

²² See in particular the already mentioned short story that concludes *Exile and Kingdom*: 'The Growing Stone'.

²³ For instance, in the last lines of *Nuptials at Tipasa*: 'Sea, landscape, silence, perfumes of this earth, I became filled with a scented life and sunk my teeth into the world's fruit, already golden, overwhelmed by the feeling of its strong, sweet juice flowing along my lips', 72.

²⁴ See the end of *The Desert*, 105: 'People rarely understand that it is never through despair that a man gives up what constituted his life... This clearly involves undertaking the survey of a certain desert. But this strange desert is accessible only to those who can live there in the full anguish of their thirst. Then, and only then, is it peopled with the living waters of happiness'.

striking is that Camus entrusts a sensuous process to open a Cartesian path to meditation. In the final section, we look further at the ethical, political, and aesthetic implications of this view.

Ethics, Politics, and Aesthetics of Sensuous Indifference

The end of *Desert*, written after Camus' travel in Tuscany, offers a valuable entry point into the ethics and aesthetics implications entailed in the notion of the world's 'tender indifference'. The passage begins with the view from the Boboli garden onto Mount Oliveto. As he looks at the landscape taking a life of its own, Camus makes the experience of the world's great unity: 'Reaching the end of so stirring a vision, with one final glance I took in the whole range of the hills breathing in unison as they slipped away, as if in some song of the entire earth'.

Then, on the basis of this exalting experience, Camus makes the following remarks: 'Millions of eyes, I knew, had gazed at this landscape, and for me it was like the first smile of the sky. It took me out of myself in the deepest sense of the word. It assured me that but for my love and this wondrous cry made of stone, there was no meaning in anything. The world is beautiful, and outside it there is no salvation. The great truth that it patiently taught me is that the mind is nothing, nor even the heart. And that the stone warmed by the sun or the cypress tree shooting up against the suddenly clear sky mark the limits of the only universe in which 'being right' is meaningful: nature without men. And this world annihilates me. It carries me to the end. It denies me without anger. As that evening fell over Florence, I was moving toward a wisdom where everything had already been overcome, except that tears came into my eyes and a great sob of poetry welling up within me made me forget the world's truth'.²⁵

The truth Camus finds revealed in being confronted to the world's 'tender indifference' is thus initially a negative one: a denunciation of human pretensions to impose their meanings and aspirations onto the world; an overcoming of narrow-minded humanism. Earlier on, Camus celebrated 'the loving understanding between the earth and human beings delivered from the human'. What is wrong with 'the human' we might ask? The problem is not simply philosophical, the theoretical risk of subjectivism, which produces category mistakes in accounting for the interaction between human knowledge and the world. The risk is also ethical and political. At the individual level, the risk is to accord too much importance to the concerns arising from one's psychology and physiology. The harsh grandeur of the world helps the individual divest herself from false hopes and insignificant concerns, and to deal with the ineluctability of death. In other words, the experience of the world's tender indifference is an alternative, sensuous way to conduct the 'absurd reasoning' that leads to the embrace of life precisely because it has no meaning. This is an ethical lesson, in Camus' understanding of that term.

At the collective, political, level, the negative lesson taught in experiencing the world's indifference is the vanity of humanity's attempts at controlling its destiny through historical creations. The travel writings consistently oppose the 'wisdom'

²⁵ *The Desert*, 103.

delivered by the world's great indifference to the illusions of historicity. Again, sensuous experience offers an alternative path to the conclusions reached elsewhere in argumentative ways, in this case, the condemnation of historicist ideology in *The Rebel*. This collective form of delusion expresses itself in different ways: in cultural and religious creations; in the ideologies of progress; in the thirst for greatness through military conquest and political power. The harsh Algerian landscapes provide direct, physical counters to these various forms of human delusion. At Tipasa, for instance, the temple is a ruin; nature has literally collapsed and covered again religious creations. There, 'the gods serve as beds or as bearings in the race of the days'. At Djemila, we find a dead city, an apt 'symbol' where 'spirit dies so that a truth can be born which is its very negation'. The ruins of the past civilisations that have successively occupied the land are 'the very negation of their ideal': 'for this skeleton town ... engraved no signs of conquest or ambition in the sky'. Rather, the fate of Djemila demonstrates that 'the world always conquers history in the end'.²⁶ In contrast with the horrors perpetrated by the civilised Europeans, Camus sees in the 'barbarian' Algerians 'the face of a culture where the greatness of man will finally find its true face'. This new culture belies the European belief in the liberating power of cultural creations: myths and literature stem from the same, misguided sense of self-importance and contribute, like religion and power politics, to humanity's self-delusion. Recall that the revelation Camus experienced at Mount Oliveto was immediately drowned by his tears and 'a great sob of poetry', which made him 'forget the world's truth'.²⁷ *Helen's Exile* summarises this suspicion towards history and its creations: 'The world has been deliberately cut off from what gives it permanence: nature, the sea, hills, evening meditations... our most significant works demonstrate the same prejudice. One looks in vain for landscapes in the major European writers since Dostoevski. History explains neither the natural universe which came before it, nor beauty which stands above it. Consequently it has chosen to ignore them'.²⁸

It is obvious though that these negative lessons are only the counterparts to more positive truths. The rejection of a narrow humanism opens the door for a new kind of humanism, defined as 'the marriage of humans and the earth',²⁹ 'the dialogue of the stone and the flesh'.³⁰ Such programmatic expressions indicate that there are important sensuous dimensions to the ethical and political imperatives Camus articulates elsewhere in his philosophical writings. The paradoxical conclusion of the *Myth of Sisyphus* (to live life to the full precisely because it has no meaning) entails the contemplation of the world's beauty, an attitude that is both aesthetic and moral. It also includes an original hedonistic imperative of radical openness to the world's qualitative features, including the most extreme. This openness leads to a metaphorical expansion of sexuality such that the environment in which the sexual act is performed becomes a part of the act. More generally, Camus seems to think that moral and political regeneration for a humanity that has descended into the abyss during the two world wars of the twentieth century, can only occur by

²⁶ *The Wind at Djemila*, 79.

²⁷ *The Desert*, 103.

²⁸ *Helen's Exile*, in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 150–51.

²⁹ *Summer in Algiers*, in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 92.

³⁰ *Summer in Algiers*, in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 83.

transforming humanity's self-understanding of its place within the world. The shock of the elements is both a warning of our essential frailty and a call for a different kind of collective action.

Such moral and political position could appear self-contradictory.³¹ The dissolution of the self at the hands of overpowering natural elements could appear to negate the possibility of free action. Meursault's character is a case in point. Doesn't the episode on the beach present a paradigmatic example of erasure of freedom and responsible action? Revolt, that central motif of Camus' philosophy, is possible in *L'Étranger* only in opposition to another human being inasmuch as he represents a human institution (religion). But the novel could be taken to show that there is no revolt possible against nature. In *Désert*, Camus addresses this apparent contradiction: 'Florence! One of the few places in Europe where I have understood that at the heart of my revolt consent is dormant... How can one consecrate the harmony of love and revolt? The earth! In this great temple deserted by the gods, all my idols have feet of clay'.³² Camus' solution to the apparent contradiction is, typically for him, to accept the paradox and embrace it. The 'earth', as the name for the absolute power of nature over human sensibility and intelligence, is both a destructive principle, which denounces human endeavours as illusions, and thus feeds the sense of revolt, and a principle of beauty, pointing to a higher realm beyond the perspective subjectively defined by human concerns. The earth is both at the same time the hill viewed from Mount Oliveto, an embodiment of absolute overwhelming force, and the nourishing soil from which grow the 'enormous golden Chinese persimmons whose bursting skin oozed a thick syrup', in other words, the ground of sensuous pleasure and desire. A formula earlier in the text summarises the solution to the apparent contradiction: 'there is a higher happiness where happiness seems trivial'.³³

The tension at the heart of the ethics and politics of sensuous indifference is also to be found at the aesthetic level. In the face of the world's radical indifference to human strivings, myth, literature, poetry, lyricism all appear as pathetic and doomed. To recall an earlier quote: 'Those who need myths are indeed poor'. The experience of sensuous overwhelming, by negating the forces and consciousness of the individual, appears to be beyond language. In the ruins at Tipasa, Camus expressed this very clearly when he intimated that the only language that could do justice to the experience of dissolution was a primitive, denotative one: 'This is red, this is blue, this is green. This is the sea, the mountain, the flowers'.³⁴ But of course, *Nuptials at Tipasa* aims for the exact opposite, as do all the other texts dedicated to sensuous experience. In them, Camus seeks new metaphors, consistently works on language, through syntactic, rhythmic, and prosodic innovations, to try and render the specificity of that experience, its quality and its significance. Indeed, the poetic and the philosophical are intimately welded in these texts, so that not only does Camus de facto show

³¹ Note that for Merleau-Ponty this is not an issue. Since he stresses the exchanges and indeed the continuum from nature to the human world, the passage from the ontological to the ethical and political is far easier for him to account for.

³² *The Desert*, 105.

³³ *The Desert*, 102.

³⁴ *Nuptials at Tipasa*, 68.

that he believes in the capacity of language to render the specificity of dehumanised experience, but also that the deep meaning of this experience and of its poetic rendering can be articulated. How is this not self-contradictory?³⁵

The solution to the apparent contradiction is the same as for ethics and politics. Rather than a contradiction, the poetic expression of dehumanising experience is a paradox to acknowledge and embrace. Indeed, this paradox is for Camus the standard by which one is able to separate good from bad literature, just as the paradox of absurd truth is the criterion of existential authenticity. Just as there is 'a higher happiness where happiness seems trivial', we could say that for Camus there is a higher literature where literature seems trivial. Literature must lift itself from out of the realm of subjectivistic concerns and seek to become the language of the world in its sublime indifference.³⁶ This imperative relates not just to the thematic content of literature, but first and foremost to style. It is clear that Camus, like so many other writers in his century,³⁷ seeks to forge a prose that would be like the 'prose of the world'. Indeed, reading Camus' early Algerian writings, one is tempted to understand this relationship of kinship between world and writing in a sense opposite to what would be expected: it is not simply style that tries to imitate the world, but the world that provides a model for writing.

All these paradoxes are well captured in a passage at the end of the text on Djemila. We might quote these words in conclusion. The alternative they leave open at the end is a good condensation of Camus' moral attitude. This alternative however is raised precisely as a result of the harsh, sensuous encounter with the world: 'The world always conquers history in the end. The great shout of stone that Djemila hurls between the mountains, the sky, and the silence – well do I know its poetry: lucidity, indifference, the true signs of beauty or despair'.³⁸

³⁵ Again, this is not a problem for Merleau-Ponty since his immanentism is premised on the continuity between natural and symbolic realms. In the words of his last philosophy, the Visible (the world of perception) is the ground of the Invisible (the world of ideas).

³⁶ See this telling declaration in *The Enigma*: 'I should like to have been an objective writer. What I call an objective author is one who chooses subjects without ever taking himself as the object', in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 159.

³⁷ One thinks of poets such as Rimbaud, Valéry, or Ponge, who defined the poetical ideal as the definition of a language that would be that of the world itself.

³⁸ *The Wind at Djemila*, 79.