

## History, Ethics, & Knowledge: A Literary History of Camus & His Plague

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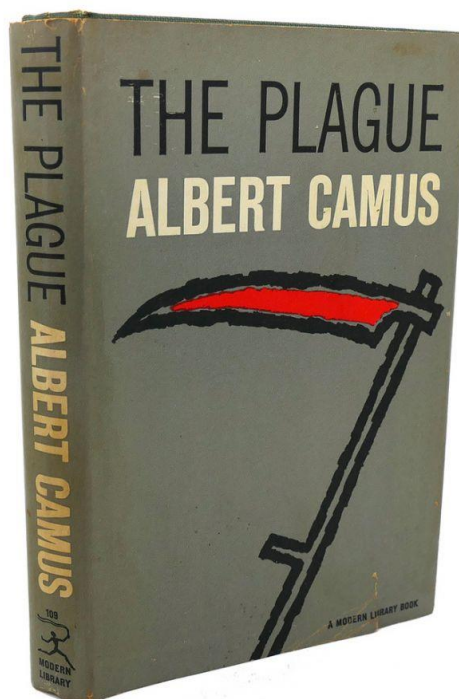
*“The evil in the world comes almost always from ignorance, and goodwill can cause as much damage as ill-will if it is not enlightened. People are more often good than bad, though in fact that is not the question. But they are more or less ignorant and this is what one calls vice or virtue, the most appalling vice being the ignorance that thinks it knows everything and which consequently authorizes itself to kill. The murderer's soul is blind, and there is no true goodness or fine love without the greatest possible degree of clear-sightedness.”*

*“And he knew, also, what the old man was thinking as his tears flowed, and he, Rieux, thought it too: that a loveless world is a dead world, and always there comes an hour when one is weary of prisons, of one's work, and of devotion to duty, and all one craves for is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart.”*

*“I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when this all ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing.”*

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From Albert Camus, *The Plague* (French: *La Peste*), 1947



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The essay before the reader is a historical review of Albert Camus and the novel, *La Peste* (1947), in the English literary criticism from 1955 to 2019, a sum of 32 scholarly articles and book chapters. Of course, it is not a definite history as a review essay, but will comprehensively cover the literary themes which were important to English readers. The critical review in the original French and in other translations is to be left to other writers; although Henri Peyre, with a few other French critics, summatively does some of this task for this author, below. What Camus' *La Peste* (1947) brings as way of literary interpretation, depends upon the decade that one is living in – the 1950s, the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s, the 2000s, and 2010s. I will explore the themes of *La Peste* and the role of life philosopher Camus in the novel, taking each decade in turn. Across all decades, the common theme was existentialism, but, when Camus denied being an existentialist, that common theme has to be explained in the nuances of many other themes.

In the 1950s the English commentary was led by Henri Peyre (1958 a, b) and Charles Moeller (1958). Perry Bialor and Max Cosman (1956) had explained that there was 'Two Views of Camus', a view of Camus as a new kind of atheist or a view of Camus as a new kind of religious philosopher, but as Bialor and Cosman explained the binary does not really hold –

Whether suicide is a valid escape, whether life has a meaning, whether within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond, are problems that he considers. Camus' plea that this work is provisional, not a metaphysic, not a belief, and not philosophy of the absurd... [1956: 91]

Bialor and Cosman rejected the tight logical interpretation of Camus – “when you question the scientist long enough he is finally reduced to talking in poetic terms”. Still the 1950s laid out the binary debates on *La Peste* and Camus. It spun on the prodigious turn to Camus from Christian Realists in the United States during a revivalist era, although, as Peyre pointed out, it originally came from a French Catholic response to Camus. Whereas Peyre merely observed the religious interpretation (referring to Camus's 'passionate unbelief'), Charles Moeller was a key Christian Realist interpreter. The clash was a **binary** of “positive humanism, a religious philosophy which, to many, is the first move toward what has been termed a 'new humanism', as explained by Thomas Hanna [1956: 224], **and** different versions of Christian doctrine which rose from within the Christian humanist tradition. One such version, the American Christian realism of Moeller was more disparaging of Camus:

The work of Camus has come to a crossroad; the anguish of dying has become simpler and more profound and the same time the accent of poverty has become stronger: the result is that the problem – the absence of hope – is all the more urgent...

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It is at this point that the someone like Teilhard de Chardin – whatever problems it may pose for scientists, philosophers or theologians – can mark out a direction for those souls who are passionately concerned for “the glory of the earth,” and whose “Kingdom is in this world.” Such men will be able to accept Jesus only the day when they can see reflected in him the power of reconciliation belonging to the religious man, and “that earthy face” which the best poets and thinkers have loved so much. To say that, for Camus, the soul is the intersection of the urge to live and the fear of death is to understand something of the desire for eternity that animates him...

...This victory [over death], however, does not resolve the problem of the immense effort of life, which is meaningless if it falls into nothingness, unless it is prelude of an immoral Pysché, or rather, of resurrection. [1958: 178]

The evangelical motif in the literary criticism is apparent. Far less severe is Charles Glicksberg (1959) who sees Camus on a quest for God – an explanation of the ontological problem where Camus brings “no abstract conjuration, no pursuit of a semantic ghost” but the divine presence, “God inevitably lurks in the background of the Existentialist manifesto of defiance.” [1959: 241] Glicksberg introduces one theme, which is periodically revisited; that Camus shares a worldview with Simone Weil, with an insistence of universal salvation, in which “the rebel's sacrificial dedication to life, not death, to love, not hate, to affirmation, not denial, marks the beginning of a religious reintegration, however paradoxical its formulation turns out to be.” [1959: 242] This is a theme of Sacrifice and the Denial of Life where the boundaries of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ themselves become meaningless. A few other themes arise in this early period. The idea of memoir for Camus as a moralist is first explored by Leon Roth (1955). In this regard the historical memory from the war experience, for both World Wars, saturates the novel – the passing of Camus’ father and his own role in war. Louis Rossi (1958) draws out another theme, how the novel stands in both traditions of existentialism and phenomenology – as influenced by Kierkegaard, Kafka, Jaspers, and Heidegger. Rossi compared the Camus novel with Hermann Broch’s *The Guiltless* (*Die Schuldlosen*, 1950), and so, the opposing ideas to those of sin, guilt, and eternal judgment are presented. *Die Schuldlosen* depicts the world that comes after the collapse of values, the immoral age and triumph of ‘Kitsch’, which inexorably leads to the Nazi concentration camps and the Shoah.

One important theme to come out of the decade of the 1950s was the argument between Roland Barthes and Albert Camus on Camus’ works, and it has only really been appreciated in the recent decade from Macs Smith (2016) and Colin Davis (2018). For Roland Barthes, the novel was simple; a call to arms against Nazism, but in the very act of using metaphor of a plague, Barthes thought that was to understand fascism as a dangerous disengagement from history. Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were even more critical of what they thought was Camus’s approach. It offended Sartre’s reasoning of ‘Bad Faith’ and absolute freedom in human choice. Simone de Beauvoir thought that in replacing the ‘human’ evil of fascism with a ‘natural’ bacterium exculpated Nazis and their collaborators for their acts. Recently Smith stated that the idea that Camus was wrong to naturalize fascism had endured in recent times. Giuliana Lund (2011) wrote “the plague allegory naturalizes evil and universalizes suffering while minimizing collaboration in the interests of

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imagining a unified resistance.” [2011: 134] Smith felt that such criticism, however, depended on a definition of the natural and that it is usually in contradiction with Camus’s usage of it in *La Peste*. In 1955, Camus responded to Roland Barthes and his criticisms. As Davis put it, Camus tried “to steer a course between the Scylla of critical anarchy and the Charybdis of authorial dogmatism.” [2018: 81] Camus insisted on his right as author to control the reception of his work, defying Barthes’ later ‘death of the author’ thesis (1967). Davis summed up the difficulties that Camus had in this decade of the 1950s:

Barthes, Camus suggests, has the right to publish his article, but he was wrong in his reading; all commentaries are legitimate, but some are more legitimate than others. Camus adds that *La Peste* can be read ‘*sur plusieurs portees*’, but that its ‘*contenu evident*’ is the struggle against Nazism (*CEuvres completes II*, p. 286); and describing the evolution from *L'Etranger* to *La Peste* he adopts a polemical firmness which contrasts strangely with the hesitations and precautions of the narrator of his own novel: ‘*Comparee a L'Etranger, La Peste marque, sans discussion possible, le passage d'une attitude de revolte solitaire a la reconnaissance d'une communaute dont il faut partager les luttes*’ (*CEuvres completes II*, p. 286; emphasis added).

Camus's exchange with Barthes gives an insight into the author's attempts to apply the hermeneutic brake to a text which, eight years after its publication, was escaping him. His desire to place constraints on the reception of his work can be explained in part by historical and biographical determinants.

...Camus’s novel indicates his desire to participate in the debate. But by 1955 Camus was feeling wounded and misunderstood; and Barthes’s article gave him the opportunity both to defend himself and to reappropriate his earlier work. Yet today, the terms of ethical debate having changed, *La Peste* may be more interesting for what remains unresolved in and by the novel than for the particular clarities which Camus wished to foreground. ... [2018: 81-82]

The year 1964, for some reason, brought another round of literary criticism on *La Peste* and Camus. Was it the death of American President Kennedy and LBJ’s ‘Great Society’? The critics brought out, at this time, a better and broader understanding of French existentialism, as well as Camus’ inadvertently-formed version of existentialism (given that Camus himself rejected the term; it is fairer to say Camus rejected Sartre’s existentialism). At this time Charles Moeller (1964) continued the Christian Realist interpretation – he turned to Merleau-Ponty’s view that the “moral conscience dies in contact with the absolute”, and Moeller questioned the sufficiency of the value in human dignity for atheism or humanism. However, such criticism undermines the same valuing for Christian humanism, in that the Christian metaphysics had not sufficiently addressed Camus’s criticisms. M.M. Madison (1964) does the greatest service in explaining the Camusian existentialism by describing Camus as a ‘philosopher of limits’:

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The writers of contemporary existential literature portray man the universe as odd-shaped pieces in some gigantic, meaningless puzzle. Deprived of teleological significance, the human creature is condemned, without hope of escape, to a barren and aimless existence. And the universe, devoid of cosmological design, is but a mass of confusion. Hence, the existential protagonist is a metaphysical misfit, groping blindly in a black world.

Albert Camus, though included in the school of contemporary existentialism, differs radically from his colleagues who equate irrational character of the universe with the character of man. Camus agrees that the universe is irrational, but that is as far as he is willing to go. Man, he discovers, is both rational and meaningful, manifesting the qualities of a benevolent human nature. Separating man from his universe by virtue of this rationality, Camus argues that human life can have value and purpose, though the chaotic universe stands in powerful refutation. In reality, then, man and the universe are antithetically related giving the age-worn struggle between good and evil, the form of rational man versus irrational nature; and the good life must be lived not in harmony but in defiance of the natural order of things.

In *The Plague*, nature puts mankind to the test, challenging with its ubiquitous weapon of death the existence of basic human goodness. The irrational and unjust universe is admittedly overpowering, yet its violent outrage cannot destroy the inherent human virtue revealed in Dr. Rieux's observation that "there are more things men to admire than to despise." The tenacity of human compassion, despite such impossible odds, substantiates the worth of man and offers him hope for a valuable existence, even in the antagonistic universe. Camus writes, "I continue to believe that this world has no higher meaning. But I know that something in it has meaning and that is man, because he is the only being to insist upon having it. This world has at least the truth of man and our task is to give him his reasons to oppose destiny itself." [1964: 223-224]

The theme is mosaic with the ideas of Design, Character, Irrationality, and Destiny. A new theme emerges of naturalism for the novel which takes a twist on both medical science and politics. It adjoins the theme of memoir in Lulu Haroutunian's (1964) reference to 'white death'. White death is tuberculosis, in contrast to the Black Death of the Bubonic Plague. Camus suffered from tuberculosis at age of 17, and living in poverty from the loss of his father in war, and as Haroutunian describes, "The house of the tuberculous was shunned by society in a fearful quarantine. Camus was 'infested' with an implacable organism that threatened a firm hold and sudden death. ... [but] 1941 brings us to a very significant date." [1964: 312, 313] In a later period, history professors David Herlihy and Samuel K. Cohn (1997) would pick up on the epidemiology and the medical problems in terms of the bubonic disease, where both similarities and difference can be found. Quarantine and the fear of sudden or rapid death are common. Furthermore, Myron Echenberg (2002) provided an examination of the Third Bubonic Pandemic 1894-1901 whereby the medical conditions and modern public health measure are described, as they inhabited the fiction of *La Peste*. Haroutunian goes to suggest that there are different levels of the naturalism and allegory of medical science; a view Nazism as a medical disease –

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The references to the German occupation (le fléau) of Paris are conspicuous: Oran the closed city (Paris), the rats (the Germans and Collaborationists), the Resistance fighters (Drs. Rieux and Castel; Joseph Grand, Tarrou and Rambert), the black-marketeer and traitor Cottard, the crematoria, the common graves. [1964: 313]

Later, Robert Zaretsky (2010) would expand on the theme of Camus' moralistic response to the German occupation. Thomas Thorson (1964) finally clarified the Camusian existentialism, by describing Camus as a 'Post-Existentialist' –

If a label is demanded, would suggest "post-existentialist," for many ways the whole purpose of Camus's investigations is to create a new and positive moral position by solving the existentialist dilemma....

...Here, a bit more explicitly than elsewhere, Camus voices a defense of men against the state, a defense which is in some ways strikingly similar to an argument which might be advanced by a pragmatist. Society has no right to kill in the absence of absolute certainty, first, that possesses a metaphysical or religious right to do so, and second, that there is no possible doubt in a particular case that there is no error of legal judgment. Given the essentially limited character of human knowledge – both in general, philosophical matters and in the practical details of evidence – neither of these conditions can ever be realized. But Camus's argument is not merely pragmatic; it is a pragmatism enriched by the existential arguments reviewed earlier. Man is not simply the fallible cognitive machine – a sort of inadequately programmed computer – he is also a being aware of imminent death for whom his own fallibility reveals the precious quality of life. It is significant to say that, because we can never be certain that we are completely right, we can never be justified in performing actions as irremedial as taking away a man's life, but it is more significant to affirm simultaneously the value of that life. [1964: 285, 290-291]

Thorson's interpretation is an insightful explanation of Morality and Law, one that, in the traditional seamless, goes back to both Socrates and Jesus. The purist religious and irreligious interpretations are completely lost in meaninglessness. Thorson's interpretation is insightful because it brings a future discussion on a broad literary theme where Thorson had great prescient, to repeat –

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Thorson brings together the cognitive and medical science, making a point that human life cannot (in the logic), or ought to not (in the semantics), be confused with the machine, including the machine of war.

The 1970s continued the debates with important contributions from Eugene Hollahan (1976) and Irene Finel-Honigman (1978). At this time the philosophy of language and mind has come to the fore; it was a time of much Wittgenstein apologetics from various places. Hollahan importantly laid out the architecture for novel in these fields. The idea of abstraction and imagination (l'abstraction, l'imagination) are clear in *La Peste*:

...Together with the word for habit (l'habitude), they establish a verbal pattern of abstraction-habit-imagination that invests the novel with much of its imaginative power as well as its structural unity and thematic significance. Throughout the story in scattered and various contexts, these three words occur forty-two times, with related forms also appearing frequently so as to reinforce the motifs. Put simply, Camus' theme is the proposition that the habitual abstraction to which individual human beings are prone, an abstraction that is the cause of one's willed detachment from the common human lot, can be countered or overcome only by the development and employment of sympathetic imagination. By developing imaginative identification with actual suffering people, one can travel the path of sympathy (la Sympathie) from isolation to communion, from detachment to involvement. [1976: 377]

The value in Hollahan's work is a clear statement of structural unity in the climate of poststructuralism. In Hollahan's article, though, there is a hint of the postcolonialist's criticism which was just emerging. The criticism is invested in the sense of place for the novel – Oran:

In the main plot, one of the wavering characters, Raymond Rambert, attempts several times to escape from Oran; finally he decides in the crisis of the plot that he must accept his own personal involvement in fighting the plague. By electing to stay in Oran and share the common fate, and then by overcoming a further temptation to abstraction, Rambert achieves the modest, problematical happiness which is the most one can hope for in Camus' grim existential world. [1976: 377]

The comments on the Algerian civil war and allegory of Oran are forthcoming. However, Finel-Honigman opens up the postcolonial and sense of place themes. Finel-Honigman believed Camus described the city of Oran in negative terms. Oran (Arabic: وهران, romanized: Wahrān) is a major coastal city located in the north-west of Algeria. Today, the population of the city is around 759,600 and the metropolitan area has a population of approximately 1,500,000, making it the second

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largest city in Algeria. It is has been an important global city for history and culture, with many literary and vision representations. Finel-Honigman stated that “In Camus' universe the cities of North Africa, Oran and Alger, serve an essential function.” [1978: 75] She explains further, “Camus perceives the city in contrast to the desert and native nomadic villages without any lesser administrative or socio-economic communities.” Then Finel-Honigman draws out the distinction between city and village (*cit * and *ville*) where Camus encompassed in the novel: “According to the Larousse [lexicography of Pierre Athanase Larousse], ‘*cit *’ is the oldest part of a city or a city of primary order; ‘*ville*’ is specifically an administrative and industrial agglomeration,” and reporting, “in modern French the word ‘*cit *’ gives the text an archaic and poetico-historic flavor.” [1978: 76] More will be said on this, further on, in relation to Conor Cruise O'Brien’s (1970) *Camus: Of Europe and Africa*.

The decade of 1980s was the early age of postmodernism, but what *radical* postmodernist interpreters continually failed to recognised in their one-sided militancy was how much of older interpretations of Campus and the Novel continued in consistent form, unabated in the masked desire for fragmentation. A good example of this critique is in John Dunaway’s (1985) discussion of estrangement and the need for ‘roots’ for both Albert Camus and Simone Weil. The point that Dunaway makes is that Camus and Weil are engaged in the active struggle for the cause of justice. This is not the kind of radicalism which is fragmented and removed from the author – the person – as the radical reading of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida would have it. In Camus the individual, community, corporate, and, most importantly, the person (personhood; not as a number, which is called ‘individual’) can co-exist; if only by means of Messy Ethics (see comments further on). For being the early age of postmodernism, the decade of the 1980s was also the cultural wars between literature and history; paralleling war between the neo-liberal politicians who were invested in romantic national literature and the historiographers with their critical glaze on fragmentation of politics for political advantage. In Lawrence Porter’s (1982) fair and moderating postmodern interpretation, there is astoundingly insight into the war of romantic literature versus history:

... Chronicles purport to record events passively as they pen from day to day. They lack self-definition. They are ostensibly shaped scarcely any aesthetic principle other than that of selection. As such, chronicles differentiate themselves from historiography, which performs acts of abstraction in order to study society and its institutions and acts of temporal shaping interpretation to consider how these collective entities evolve. The diary is a chronicle that relates events to the self, whereas the chronicle proper presents as a detached observer. *La Peste* conforms to the latter model. Only near do we learn that Doctor Rieux was its writer. For the text advocates solidarity. Were he to say “I” he would set himself apart from his fellows as does in his notebooks or Paneloux in his first sermon—apart “not only grammatically, but also by allowing us to infer his immunity from the death that hangs everyone else.”

... From the raw materials assembled by a chronicle, one can move in either of two opposite directions: toward fiction or toward history. The epistemological viewpoints of fiction (virtual ignorance) and of history (virtual omniscience) mutually opposed. As a point of



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departure, the writer of fiction takes his or her actual omniscience and moves toward virtual ignorance. The historian begins with his or her actual ignorance and moves toward a virtual omniscience. [1982: 589, 590]

Clearly, Porter is on the side of the historians, at least those historiographers who hold to solidarity, even as, like Camus, an appreciation for the truth on both sides. Postcolonialism became the order of the day in the 1990s, and rightly so – it was a delayed catch-up with the political de-colonialization of the 1950s. In recent times David Carroll (1997) has become a moderating postcolonial interpreter of Camus and the Novel. Back in 1970 Conor Cruise O'Brien had set the framing of the debate in *Camus: Of Europe and Africa*:

Camus's position in the 1950s was one of extreme intellectual and emotional difficulty and tension. He had written about freedom, justice, violence and revolt in abstract terms, and asserted principles which he presented as of both fundamental importance and universal application. He never altogether abandoned this language, and he continued to write about politics in the tone of a severe moralist. Yet his actual positions were political and partisan. The violence of the Hungarian rebels and of the Anglo-French expedition in Egypt raised no problems. It was violence “on the right side” – precisely the logic he had rejected, on grounds of a rigorous morality, in relation to revolutionary violence. Freedom was an absolute for the Hungarians, and their violence in asserting their will “to stand upright” was “pure.” The violence of the Algerian Arabs, who thought that they were making the same claim, was “inexcusable,” and the nature and degree of the freedom to be accorded to them were matters to be decided by France, in the light of its own strategic needs – a plea was irrelevant when made by Russia. [1970: 91]

This postcolonial interpretation reverses the view of the Camus who actually broke down the binary moralism of his day. The Algerian civil war, much like the conflict in the old-named Rhodesia, was out of step with the general ‘Wind of Change’ postcolonial independent movements, and it has to be understood that French and British motivations for decolonisation were not always honourable. Camus was a Euro-French moderate whose first loyalties were to the colonial place and culture of homeland Algeria (as opposed to the Arab-African identification). His politics was hopeful rather than militant, and his vision was anchored in Classical North Africa with cosmopolitan city life within imperial politics. Emily Apter in 1997 describes well both the failure of the Camusian vision and what it may still offer for the transnational future:

The failure of Camus's cosmopolitical hybrid – a vision of French Algeria collapses in the face of an emergent Algerian nationalism – offers kind of object lesson for the future of globalization theory transnational identity-formation. The lesson is simply this: just as you succumb to the illusion of a “global subject” (who, as Bill Readings would have it, moves in a bureaucratic space of eroded nationalism because the “capitalist system ... offers people not

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a national . . . but a non-ideological belonging: a corporate identity in they participate only at the price of becoming operatives”), nationalism resurges in a different guise, asserting its particularist anew, and, in the case of contemporary Algeria, projecting inherited binational schisms onto the hybrid body-politic. [1997: 516]

The problem was not as Conor Cruise O'Brien tended to see it, but as Emily Apter, Lawrence Kritzman, (1997) and David Carroll (1997) considered Camus' thinking – romantic but not without political virtues if its shortcomings are addressed. Kritzman cited Michael Walzer (1988) from his book, *Company of Critics*, which characterized Albert Camus as “a man of principle, a good man ... in a bad time.” [1988: 137] According to both the interpretation of Walzer and Kritzman, Camus co-opted an ethic embedded in a humanism, which is characterised in a generalized sense of justice and a universal commitment to human values. This was achieved by Camus from his critique of Marxism in *L'homme revolte* (1951). Camus's critical approach was the politics of love and classical ethos of measure. Kritzman see this classical-type humanism as substitution for Neo-Aristotelian reflective action and its understanding for absolute values, saying that “the focus of moral concerns for Camus was not rooted in a legislative operation capable of generating both prescriptive proscriptive behavior.” [1997: 550] Kritzman has a point, but not well-made from the classical ethical theories which were in play in the modern context. Kritzman stated that, in human choices, Camus had a moral dimension that endowed them with ethical authority, and that in *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) Camus suggests that such decision-making has consequences, as individual political agency has that impact on the world. The emphasis on authority and consequences actually goes back to Aristotle and to Neo-Aristotelian reflective action. Aristotle's eudemonia, ‘human flourishing or prosperity’ and ‘blessedness’, in fact, does not suggest absolute value at all; rather it suggest a series of judgements over a life-time which cannot be so nicely or neatly calculated. According to Kritzman, how the ethical system works is in “human judgment culminating in the formation of an ‘imagined community’ whose sense of togetherness was based on a belief in harmony and justice with intuition functioning as the oracle of truth.” Bringing out this idea of imagination, Carroll writes:

Camus's Algeria, the Algeria of his literary texts and essays, is an imaginary place that is related in various and complex ways to the “real Algeria” where Camus was born and grew up and to which he remained deeply attached throughout his life. It is a place whose physical characteristics and social dynamics owe as much, to Camus's desires, fears, and his imaginative faculty or his literary aesthetic sensibilities as to his sense of history or politics or his critical, analytical faculties. Camus's Algeria is rooted as much in his dreams (and nightmares) as in lived experiences; it takes in his novels and short stories than in his journalism and political pronouncements. Its location, history, and relations to other imaginary (and real) places thus cannot be determined either consulting maps of Africa, no matter how detailed, or history books, no matter how complete, for it owes as much to Camus's art and imagination as it does to geography, ideology, or a systematic understanding of history and politics.

... cultural critics intent on highlighting the injustices and devastation caused by colonialism and the way its effects are still being felt in the postcolonial world thus would have very

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good reasons for attacking *on political grounds* both Camus's Algeria and the “moderate solutions” to the Algerian question he proposed both and during the Algerian War. But if a critic today were intent on indicting Camus for being the spokesperson for an alleged colonialist mentality, he or she would find that much of the task had accomplished and that a model for a severe postcolonial critique of Camus and his work has existed for quite some time... [1997: 517-518, 519]

Carroll goes on to validate O'Brien's critique while at the same to show that it had not appreciated the value of Camus' moderating position; as Carroll stated in the ethic of moderates: “My purpose in this essay is neither to praise Camus, the secular, literary saint, nor to condemn Camus, the political sinner, who fell from sainthood by having ‘flinched from the realities’ of colonialism.” [1997: 527] Carroll points out that Camus's Algeria was, in fact, different to the colonialism of the French authorities. In 1937, Camus, called for equable cultural unity created in the Mediterranean basin by Romance languages (on the occasion inauguration of a Maison de la Culture in Algiers and as a member of the Communist Party). It was a cosmopolitan vision of cultural-linguistic unity on behalf of ‘Mediterranean collectivism,’ which would guarantee justice and equality for both European and Arab Algerians. In political detail, Camus' vision could be shown to be wrong about the politics of Algeria, but the ideals and the practical day-to-day politics of the moderates was not a cause for injustice. On the contrary, Camus was a spokesperson for condemning the very condition of injustice, and it was practice politics (then and now) in which Camus and others abhorred the simplification of the situation in Algeria. The militancy of ‘independence’ on both sides had made advocates blind to the cultural inter-dependence, a point made by Edward Said. It is Carroll (2001) who follows this point of Said in relation to Camus, in the next decade.

“I shall also be following Edward Said in my attempt to think across, over, around, or under borders in my reading of Camus,” stated Carroll [2001: 92] , explaining:

I will be following the Said of the preface of *Culture and Imperialism* [1993] who insists that what matters today in the history of relations between East and West is not only the history of Western imperialism, domination, and colonial expansion—and the myths of Western superiority that accompany them and justify them. But it is also the fact that this history, for better or worse, produced undeniable interconnections that are now within both the East and the West: "For the first time, the history of imperialism and its culture can now be studied as neither monolithic nor reductively compartmentalized, separate, distinct." Said insists that given the history of colonialist conquest, one of the paradoxical results of independence is, for better and/or for worse, interdependence. He concludes that “partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (xxv). ... [2001: 92]

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This version of Said's thinking was inspired by Etienne Balibar's idea of 'numerical allegory' and his rejection of simple political-cultural math. However, from one of the essays in *Culture and Imperialism*, 'Camus and the French Imperial Experience', Said condemned Camus's 'realistic' descriptions of Algerian landscapes and his unproblematic expression of a colonialist world view. Carroll points out that Said had too quickly forgotten his earlier analysis:

...Such a reading not only assumes that the border separating "French" and "Arab" Algerians was, under colonialism, and remains, after independence, exclusively an exterior, geographic-political border, but it also situates Camus unproblematically on the colonialist side of the border. It denies him any rights not only to his North African heritage but also to his lyrical descriptions of Algerian landscapes and his imaginary projections of and identifications with a heterogeneous "Algerian people." It treats all such descriptions simply and dogmatically as expressions of colonialism.

Such a reading implies that since the French claim to Algeria was itself illegitimate, all relations to and identifications with Algeria and whether imaginary or real, that can be labeled "French" must be treated as illegitimate as well. And this is so in spite of the privilege Said himself attributes in his preface to the theme and existential fact of the exile, to have been "condemned" to live his/her life outside the borders of any homeland and thus to have a perspective on culture that is not determined by border or national-cultural context. To be condemned to exile is thus also for Said to have the privilege of the exile's critical perspective. Exile, of course, is a theme, if not the dominant theme of Camus's writings as well. [2001: 92-93]

It is at this point that Carroll gives a new angle on a major theme in the Camusian tome of literary criticism, that of the city of Oran and the sense of place, from the earlier works of Eugene Hollahan (1976) and Irene Finel-Honigman (1978):

... In order to situate Camus more precisely in terms of colonialism in general and the question of the internal and external borders of "French" or colonized Algeria in particular, I shall deal here with a very specific issue in his work: his portrayal of the city of Oran in *La Peste* and essays from *L'Été*. For the sake of comparison, however, it will be useful first to consider how Oran was presented by an unapologetically colonialist historian and geographer whose purpose was to celebrate the city's economic prosperity after 100 years of "successful" colonial rule.

**[and; quotation re-sequenced]**

...The idea of a completely homogeneous city, a city where everyone was of the same linguistic, cultural, religious, and ethnic background would have to be considered at best incredibly boring (isn't that what suburbs are for?), and at worst a nightmare, sheer horror,

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part of a brave new world only imaginable as the horrible result of some form of nationalist, religious, cultural, or ethnic “cleansing.”

Cities of course are constituted not just by external borders separating them from the suburbs or *banlieue* where the well-to-do have fled or the poor have been driven, but also by numerous internal borders which are called either neighborhoods, boroughs, villages or arrondissements, on the one hand, or barrios or ghettos, on the other. In the French colonies of North Africa these borders separated distinct areas that had names such as *la cité européenne*, *la Casbah*, *le village nègre*, or *le quartier juif*, names that left little ambiguity as to which segments of the population lived in each of them. During colonialism, these internal borders delineated, and in postcolonial cities today they in fact continue to delineate, areas where peoples from specific ethnic, economic, linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, by choice or necessity, live in miniature cities within the city, both as a part of the city and apart from the city as a whole. In colonial cities passages across the borders separating the neighborhoods of colonizer and colonized were of course severely limited and closely monitored, at least in terms of the colonized. But we need to ask ourselves exactly how such borders differed from those in the postcolonial cities we now inhabit. It might even be possible to argue that there is something profoundly colonialist about the modern city itself, something that was part of the very formation of the internal borders within modern cities and that persists after the demise of colonialism... [2001: 93, 88]

Several literary critics followed up on the same theme in the same decade. Colin Davis (2007) re-examined the role of Oran’s rats to spell out more clearly the Camus’ ethic of the Novel, to which Davis’ labels ‘Messy Ethics’. Rats are “represent a residue or semantic excess through which the questions of ethical choice action are posed”. [2007: 1008] And...

...Yet the novel shows, and to some extent epitomizes, the failure to respond adequately. Tidiness is preferred to mess, even if the imposition narrative order is at the cost of simplification and repression. The novel can read as an act of containment, in which what is at stake is how to eradicate threat of the unwanted other.

### **[and; quotation re-sequenced]**

..The rest of the novel can be read as the endeavour to put the rat back in its place by understanding, explaining, and overcoming its unwarranted appearance, in short by making out of it a narrative which will lead to the expulsion (albeit, as the final sentence of the novel concedes, its provisional expulsion) from a now properly tidied textual space. [2007: 1008]

It has to then be admitted that ‘Messy Ethics’ is a combination of chaos and re-ordering. The Novel cannot remain in permanent fragmentation. As Christopher Robinson (2009) shows, theorizing the politics of the Novel cannot be rejected. Robinson reads these “novels that isolates theorizing as an

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activity performed not from a transcendent perceptual vantage of perfect light and vision, but from the immanent perspectives achieved in the city, among friends, or by exile.” [2009: 1] Relations between friends are something structured, re-ordered from the chaos.

In the recent decade the themes of the moral, aesthetic, spiritual, and personal, have continued in the literary discussion. On morality, David Stromberg (2014) argued that a dynamic of revising one’s own principles emerged as one of the novel’s recurrent theme, with characters undergoing extreme hardship, modifying the principles that have guided their conduct. This argument came from a history of criticism on the tension between the ethical and the aesthetics, going back to Edwin Moses, in ‘Functional Complexity: The Narrative Techniques of *The Plague*’ (1974); Laurence Porters’ ‘From Chronicle to Novel: Artistic Elaboration in Camus’s *La Peste*’ (1983); to John Krapp, in ‘Time and Ethics in *The Plague*’ (2002). Maša Mrovlje (2019a) felt that Camus was among a “plethora of thinkers who elevate judgement, and the corollary notions of choice, deliberation and practical reason, into one of the most pressing issues of ethics and politics.” [2019: 22] The approach contrasted with “the traditional focus on constructing abstract and universal standards of morality, the problematic of judgement makes persistent appearance in the history of political thought.” In this regard, Mrovlje thought there was common thinking in the unorthodox versions of existentialism in Camus and Hannah Arendt. Maša Mrovlje (2019b) stated in one of his chapter abstracts:

Responding to the recognised tragedies of the world of political affairs, this chapter turns to Camus’s and Arendt’s existential orientation which nevertheless resists the conventional world-view of ‘existentialism’. In their efforts to understand the breakdown of traditional standards of thought, it unveils a deeper recognition of the dangers of nihilism and excess that accompany the situated ambiguity of political judgement. In turn, it discerns in their aesthetic sensibility a heightened sense of the need to creatively confront the plurality and complexity of the world, rather than resign to the logic of inevitability and failure. [2019: 81]

On spirituality, John Carlson (2014) criticised the interpretation of Camus from the ‘new atheism’. There was a distorted conception of ‘the secular’ that the new atheists presumed. As Carlson explained, Camus was an unbeliever who was distinctive for his humility. Camus had the capacity to formed common cause with religious figures and, at other times, engaged them critically. One religious figure that Camus took a strong interested in was Saint Augustine. Carlson says:

...Camus knew and admired Augustine's work even if he didn't share his faith. What they did share—a common upbringing in North Africa, a deep intellectual preoccupation with the problem of evil, and a concern to distinguish the affairs of this world from all forms of political absolutism or heavenly utopianism—formed the basis for a vision of the secular that is much in need in our own polarizing times. [2014: 50]

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On personhood, Anne Quinney (2014) returns to the memoir theme, which, while had been less discussed in the subsequent decades, had still bubbled away:

As early as 1936, at the age of 23, Camus' identity as a specifically Algerian writer, sensitive to the Mediterranean landscape and to what he called "the unbearable grandeur of this sky choked by the heat" was forged in a short work entitled *Noces*. [2014: 72]

Quinney sees *Noces* "on many levels is a love story between author and landscape, a celebration of one man's deeply visceral attachment to his environment, and homage to the memory of a sun-filled childhood in Oran tainted both by poverty and sickness." [2014: 72] Here themes of personhood, memoir, and the sense of place (Oran, North Africa) roll into one important insight. *Noces*, Camus' second published work can be rendered in English as 'nuptials', or 'wedding party' or even 'marriage'. It goes to the person's experience. Camus married and divorced a morphine addict, Simone Hié, and he was a womanizer throughout his life. As Quinney re-tells the story:

Although he left Algeria in his late twenties, Camus would always refer to his formative years there as winter-less, as if the sun never ceased to shine upon him. And if the brilliant sun and blue sky dominated the memory of his childhood, certainly the cold and gloomy Parisian skies permeated the setting of his adult life, fortifying his desire for the African heat and light, and augmenting all the more his 'nostalgérie.' [2014: 72]

Memoir, a person and their experience against the landscape of the sense of place – it is an appropriate place to conclude. The final word ought to be the author, with contempt for the nonsense of Roland Barthes.

It comes from Camus' Banquet Speech, at the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony, Stockholm, on 10 December, 1957:

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“For myself, I cannot live without my art. But I have never placed it above everything. If, on the other hand, I need it, it is because it cannot be separated from my fellow men, and it allows me to live, such as I am, on one level with them. It is a means of stirring the greatest number of people by offering them a privileged picture of common joys and sufferings. It obliges the artist not to keep himself apart; it subjects him to the most humble and the most universal truth. And often he who has chosen the fate of the artist because he felt himself to be different soon realizes that he can maintain neither his art nor his difference unless he admits that he is like the others. The artist forges himself to the others, midway between the beauty he cannot do without and the community he cannot tear himself away from. That is why true artists scorn nothing: they are obliged to understand rather than to judge. And if they have to take sides in this world, they can perhaps side only with that society in which, according to Nietzsche’s great words, not the judge but the creator will rule, whether he be a worker or an intellectual.”

**Albert Camus**

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