

Existentialism as Literature

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To what extent does existentialism constitute itself as a literary rather than a primarily philosophical phenomenon? Or, to put a slightly different, but related question: what form does existentialism take when it is viewed *as literature* rather than as *philosophy*? Such questions arise as a fairly direct consequence of the fact that a number of key existentialist works (or works that have generally been regarded as such) have indeed been works of literature – Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* (*La Nausée*, 1938¹) and Albert Camus’ *The Outsider* (*L’Étranger*, 1939) being two excellent examples – while some of the key figures within or close to the existentialist tradition have been literary rather than philosophical – arguably this is true of Camus, and certainly of Beckett. Rather than simply provide an exploration of existentialism in literature, or a survey of those literary works that figure within existentialism, this essay will also examine the idea of existentialism *as literature* – sketching a picture of existentialism as it emerges in literary, rather than solely philosophical terms.

Although it is sometimes argued that existentialism stands in a special relationship to literature – that it is an especially ‘literary’ mode of philosophising – David E. Cooper argues that over-reliance on existentialist fiction has actually been a source of misconceptions about existentialism. Refusing to include Camus among the existentialists, or to allow that he

might be a philosopher, Cooper claims that “existentialism...is not a mood or a vocabulary, but a relatively systematic philosophy.”² I am less persuaded than Cooper by the idea of existentialism as a “systematic philosophy” (if there is anything that is systematic in existentialism, then it is, it seems to me, just phenomenology³), and much more inclined to view existentialist literature as providing an important means of access to existentialist thinking or, at least, to what has to be viewed as a form of such thinking. While one approach to existentialism is through the philosophical works that make it up, another approach is surely through the literary works that represent a parallel, and sometimes alternative, mode of articulation and expression.

1. Literature and Existentialism

“The novelist” says Milan Kundera “is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence.”⁴ Certainly the novel would seem to be centrally focused on the character of human existence, albeit as portrayed through its concrete and singular instances. Is the novelist also, therefore, an existentialist?⁵ The problem with such a conclusion is that it threatens to make existentialist literature almost co-extensive with literature as such, or at least with much modern literature. Yet existentialism is surely much narrower than this, on one account naming a historically specific phenomenon that is primarily focussed around the literary and philosophical work of a loosely associated group of French thinkers and writers, centred on Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, in particular, from the late 1930s, and extending into

the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover, even if one expands the scope of existentialism to encompass, first, its nineteenth century precursors such as Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky, and, second, the German philosophers, especially Heidegger, who provided much of its conceptual underpinning, then existentialism nevertheless names what is still a fairly circumscribed body of thought and work.

Of course, much of the discussion of existentialism, past and present, has taken a much wider and more liberal view – nowhere more so than in the treatment of existentialism in literature.⁶ Where literary works are concerned, existentialism is sometimes so broadly construed as to allow even Shakespeare to be included, along with a host of other dramatists, novelists, and poets. Writers as diverse as W. H. Auden, Philip K. Dick, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, John Fowles, William Faulkner, André Gide, Graham Greene, Henrik Ibsen, Hermann Melville, Iris Murdoch, Vladimir Nabokov, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Miguel de Unamuno, to name but some, have all been characterised, at one time or another, and with more or less justification, as belonging to the existentialist tradition. Indeed, one might wonder whether there is *any* modern literary figure of note who has not at some point been characterised in this way.

The broadening of existentialism that can be observed here, and that is especially problematic in regard to literature, is surely enabled and encouraged by a tendency to conflate the *existentialist* with the *existential*,⁷ as well as by the way in which explicit existential themes have also come to be

central to much modern literature as well as to certain streams within twentieth-century philosophy. Yet if 'existentialism' is to be in any way a meaningful category in discussion, and if we are to maintain a sense of existentialism as a distinctive development within modern literature as well as philosophy, then it seems we do indeed need to distinguish the existentialist from the existential. In fact, the distinction is not only necessary, but well-founded. Apart from the mere verbal difference between the terms, 'existential' not only has a longer history (the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists an occurrence from 1693⁸), but also a broader usage, an employment in a wider range of contexts (including logic), and a different meaning. 'Existential' refers to that which pertains to existence (the OED's 1693 citation talks of an 'existential good' meaning the good that is associated with existing⁹), whereas 'existentialist' (and 'existentialism') refers to a particular philosophical attitude or mode of philosophical inquiry – an attitude or mood that, in general terms, thematizes the problematic character of human existence in a world in which there is no pre-given source of meaning or significance.

On the basis of this distinction between the existential and the existentialist, we can identify important existential themes in the text of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for instance, without thereby incorporating Shakespeare into the existentialist canon, and we can also acknowledge the way in which existential concerns have always been addressed in literature, as well as art, without turning all literature into *existentialist* literature.

Yet even if existentialism in literature is less ubiquitous than might sometimes be presented, we might still ask whether there is not, as Kundera's comment might be taken to suggest, some special connection between existentialism and literature – if literature cannot itself be said to be given over to an existentialist perspective, might it not be the case that existentialism can be viewed as nevertheless given over, in some important way, to literary expression? The character of existentialism as centrally concerned with human existence – and as always *engaged* with human existence, both politically and personally – is surely itself such as to tend existentialism *as philosophy* towards the expression of existentialism *as literature*. Indeed, when one looks to that group of French writers whose works surely constitute the core of the existentialist canon, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, Marcel,¹⁰ and Merleau-Ponty, it is striking that, with the exception of Merleau-Ponty (who may be viewed as strictly speaking more a phenomenologist than an existentialist), all gained reputations as literary figures, irrespective of their status as philosophers. Moreover, this literary emphasis might be taken to be evident from the very first in the 'indirect' character of Kierkegaard's work, in Nietzsche's use of the figure of Zarathustra, and in the importance that can be assigned to the novels of Dostoyevsky in pre-figuring themes in later existentialist thought.

It has to be said, however, that the expression of philosophical ideas in literary form is not peculiar to existentialism (Plato presents us with an especially salutatory case in point), and, within the French tradition, in

particular, literature and philosophy have often been intertwined – Rousseau being perhaps the best and most obvious example, but Voltaire being another.¹¹ Inasmuch as the latter are both Enlightenment figures, one might view the entanglement of literature and philosophy in French existentialism as a continuation of a tendency already established within the culture of the French Enlightenment itself. Moreover, in what is perhaps (alongside Joyce's *Ulysses*) the greatest literary work of modernity, and certainly of modern French literature, Proust's massive *A la recherche du temps perdu*, one finds an example of a literary work that is also clearly philosophical in its orientation (it is not irrelevant that Proust was the nephew of Bergson), and that exerted an enormous influence, at least in France, on both the literature and philosophy that succeeded it. Not only in terms of works and individuals, however, but also institutionally, philosophy in France has always tended to spill over what might be thought to be its disciplinary boundaries, never remaining within the confines of the academy alone. Philosophy has thus located itself in the café and the *lycée*, the magazine and the newspaper, and not merely in the scholarly essay nor the lecture room, while philosophers themselves have often found themselves as much at home in the theatre, the editorial office, and the school, as in the university.

It is, however, significant that the apparent connection between existentialist philosophy and existentialist literature that one finds in France is not so clearly replicated when one looks to that other possible home for existentialism, Germany. One finds there, especially in the twentieth century,

a much clearer demarcation between the philosophical and the literary – and this is so even in respect of supposed existentialist writing. Nietzsche is perhaps the exception, although a nineteenth exception. When one looks to those works of Jaspers and Heidegger that are usually assimilated to the existentialist tradition one finds works, not of literature, but of philosophy (both Jaspers and Heidegger also occupied positions as professors in the discipline), while in the case of twentieth century writers such as Hermann Hesse, some of whose writing is also treated as existentialist in character, one finds works that belong primarily to literature (with Hesse working outside academia). Perhaps most telling in the German case is the fact that while Heidegger's later writing is invariably treated as falling outside of the existentialist canon, even though his early work, specifically *Being and Time*, is viewed as lying at its core, it is precisely in the later writing that Heidegger is often seen to present his work in less traditionally philosophical and more literary or 'poetic' form with much of the impetus of the later writing also deriving from the German romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin.¹² In this respect, when it comes to Heidegger, the existentialist and the 'literary' appear to stand, not together, but quite apart from one another.

One cannot, then, assume a conception of existentialism as *inevitably* tending towards expression in literary form. In France, the connection between existentialism and literature, although certainly present, nevertheless stands within a cultural context in which philosophy and literature are often inter-twined; in Germany, not only does the connection not obtain (at least,

not beyond the example of Nietzsche), but the development of Heidegger's thought, in particular, exhibits a move towards the literary at the same time as it moves away from what might be viewed as its existentialist elements. Yet even though existentialism cannot be simply viewed as a mode of philosophy always given over to literary expression, it is nevertheless also true there is a significant body of literature that is itself given over to existentialist ideas and approaches. Existentialism can thus be viewed as naming not only a *philosophical* attitude or approach, but also a certain *literary* genre or style that is most closely associated with French literature from the middle of the twentieth century, but that also relates to a wider group of nineteenth and twentieth century writers from Europe as well as the United States.

2. Literary Precursors: Dostoyevsky, Kafka, and Others

Existentialist thought is usually taken to be foreshadowed in the work of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Indeed, it is in Kierkegaard that we first find the development of a mode of thinking that takes the individual in its concrete existence as the primary philosophical focus. Moreover, as already noted briefly above, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also present their ideas in ways that eschew the usual stylistic conventions of philosophical writing, adopting fictional and other devices to advance their thought. Much of Nietzsche's work appears in aphoristic form, sometimes relying, most notably in the case of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Also sprach Zarathustra*, 1891), on narrative and even song, while Kierkegaard's

method of 'indirect communication', which also makes use of stories and jokes, and was developed in explicit opposition to the academic prose of Hegelian thought, involves writing from multiple perspective under a variety of pseudonyms, forcing the reader to a personal engagement with the material at hand.

Yet in spite of their unorthodox styles and techniques, the work of Kierkegaard as well as Nietzsche still remains much more firmly placed within the realm of philosophy rather than of literature. From a purely literary perspective, the key figure in the development of existentialism is not so much Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, but rather Feodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881). It would, of course, be a mistake to treat Dostoyevsky as an 'existentialist' writer, and not merely for reasons of historical anachronism. Dostoyevsky's work is clearly much broader in scope and impact than such a label would suggest - he is, indeed, one of the great figures within nineteenth century literature in a way that goes beyond any particular intellectual, literary or philosophical style or movement. Nevertheless, Dostoyevsky's writing takes up many themes and exhibits many of the characteristics that are also central to later existentialist literature, while Dostoyevsky is himself taken up, and is a significant influence on, philosophers and writers from Nietzsche to Sartre. Dostoyevsky is especially important for Camus, who adapted Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* (*Besy*, 1872) for the stage under the title *The Possessed* (*Les Possédés*, 1959).

Dostoyevsky can be seen to set out, in the most vivid and powerful fashion, the problematic situation that underpins much existentialist thought – the situation of the solitary individual, the ‘outsider’, who can no longer find any sure refuge in God or religion, for whom the usual standards of morality and conduct, even the standards of reason itself, no longer seem to hold, and whose very existence is rendered uncertain and ambiguous. It is this individual, often presented as torn within himself, as his own ‘double’, who appears, in various guises, as the central figure in many of Dostoyevsky’s works from *Notes From Underground* (*Zapiski iz podpolya*, 1864) – a work famously described by Walter Kaufmann as “one of the most revolutionary and original works of world literature” and “the best overture to existentialism ever written”¹³ – to *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Brat'ya Karamazovy*, 1880). Often he appears as a multiple figure – Golyadkin and his double in *The Double* (*Dvojniki*, 1864); Dmitri, Ivan, Alexei (Alyosha), and the illegitimate Smerdyakov, who are the four Karamazov brothers themselves (the double doubled). In *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866), he is the student Raskolnikov, for whom murder becomes a form of philosophical experiment, while in other works, notably *The Idiot* (*Idiot*, 1869) and *The Devils*, this uncertain and ambiguous situation, and the antagonistic forces that obtain within it, is given form through the tragic and often violent interactions within a group of characters, and the larger social and political forces that they represent.

Dostoyevsky's explicit concern with ethical and psychological themes, his preoccupation with the disunity and fragmentation of the self, the often introverted and complex nature of his characters, and the ambiguous and uncertain outcomes to his stories, all anticipate elements of later existentialist writing. Yet it is notable that Dostoyevsky's own response to the existential situation that he so acutely describes is one that is much more akin to a Christian humanist ethic of love than to anything to be found in the work of existentialists such as Sartre. Thus, while the parable that forms a central element in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the tale of 'The Grand Inquisitor' (perhaps the passage from Dostoyevsky most often read by students of existentialist literature),¹⁴ provides no clear resolution within the confines of the section in which it appears, emphasising instead the difficulty and ambiguity of the questions of freedom and responsibility it poses (the entire section is titled "Pro and Contra"), other sections of the work advance a rather more positive message, even if not made fully determinate, centred on the essentially ethical path adopted by Alyosha. Indeed, one of the most powerful images in *The Brothers Karamazov* is the scene in which Ivan asks of Alyosha whether he would consent to the torture of a single innocent child in return for the unalloyed happiness of the entire world.¹⁵ Alyosha's answer is that he would not. It is an answer that will later be echoed, in real and urgent circumstances, by Camus.¹⁶

If in Dostoyevsky one finds an account of the uncertainty and pain of the human condition that nevertheless demands of us a human and ethical

response, no matter how difficult that may be, that same condition reappears in the work of Franz Kafka in a way that emphasises its absurdity and apparent meaninglessness, but without any sense of the same ethical response – it is as if, in Kafka’s universe, no such response is even conceivable. Written during the first two decades of the twentieth-century, but mostly appearing for the first time in published form in the 1920s and 1930s (largely posthumously), Kafka’s work paints a world all the more nightmarish for its juxtaposition of the abnormal and the irrational with the banal and apparently everyday.¹⁷ In Kafka a man can be transformed into a gigantic beetle overnight (*The Metamorphosis – Die Verwandlung*, 1915) and yet attempt to continue a ‘normal’ life as if he were merely afflicted by some temporary social embarrassment; a trial can be conducted without any indication of the crime at issue, the possible punishment, or the length and nature of the process (*The Trial – Der Prozess*, 1925). If it is the work of Dostoyevsky that provides the literary precursor to the psychological and ethical preoccupations of existentialism, it is in Kafka that we find prefigured something of the nausea of Sartre and the absurdity of Camus. In some respects, the situation that Kafka describes is the same situation of loss of meaning that also concerns Dostoyevsky, but whereas Dostoyevsky presents that loss in terms of an antagonism that exists within and between persons, and as instantiated in the form of real human suffering, Kafka presents it in the bizarre irrationality of ordinary, everyday life – like the surrealists, with

whom he has some obvious affinities, Kafka makes even the familiar appear suddenly strange and threatening.

Dostoyevsky and Kafka are the two literary figures most frequently cited as forerunners of the existentialist writers of the 1940s and 1950s. Yet they are not the only writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century who have been adopted by or assimilated to the existentialist tradition. Although in their case it is specific writings that are usually deemed of significance rather than their work taken as a whole, three other writers who are often read in this way are Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), the Norwegian Nobel-prize winner Knud Hamsun (1859-1952) and the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926).

Tolstoy's, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (*Smert' Ivana Il'icha*, 1886) tells the story of a successful man, a judge, conscious of his social status and success, who discovers he is dying, and in the process also discovers the hollowness and artificiality of the life he has lived. Ivan Ilyich is only redeemed, and his suffering brought to an end, in the last moments before death, through a recognition of the importance of those around him, and a sense of love and compassion. While Tolstoy's novel contains strongly Christian elements, it is also a powerful examination of the fragmentation of a life, as well as of the retrieval of its significance, in the face of the imminence of death – a death that is also unalterably and finally one's own.

Hamsun's *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890), often seen as one of the founding works of modernist literature, recounts the psychological disintegration of a young

writer as he struggles for basic survival outside of the usual framework of society in the Norwegian city of Kristiania. Hamsun's work is strongly influenced by Dostoyevsky, and combines Dostoyevsky's own psychological narration with a bleak portrayal of the corrosive and debilitating effects of modern city life. In this latter respect, Hamsun also represents a romantic reaction to modernity that is evident in other German writers, but is also seen as associated with Hamsun's own conservative political tendencies (given clearest expression in his Nazi sympathies during the Second World War).

Recognized as one of the greatest German poets of the last two centuries, Rilke's one novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910) was cited by Sartre as a direct influence on his own writing. As its title suggests, the novel takes the form of a journal or set of notes – a loosely connected series of reminiscences, reflections, descriptions, and stories – as set down by a young writer living away from his native Denmark in Paris. Malte Laurens Brigge is both a writer and a foreigner in the city in which he lives. Yet preoccupied with the inevitability of death, and the character of time as moving us ever closer to it, Brigge also finds himself alienated in a more profound way than his circumstances might suggest, experiencing the world as empty and without meaning. An outsider existentially as well as socially, Brigge thus exemplifies the same figure we have already encountered in Dostoyevsky, as well as in Kafka, Hamsun, and even Tolstoy (Ivan Ilyich is rendered an outsider by his approaching death) – a figure who will reappear in much later existentialist

literature, including that of Sartre and Camus, as well as in other writers such as Hemingway and Hesse.¹⁸

3. Sartre and de Beauvoir: Metaphysics, Engagement, and Writing

It is doubtful if existentialism would have appeared as a distinctive mode of philosophical or literary expression at all were it not for Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1996). Moreover, for both Sartre and de Beauvoir, writing and philosophy were inextricably bound together – writing was, for them, essentially about *ideas* rather than mere artistic expression or aesthetic creation.

Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964 (an award which he refused), Sartre's first and probably most widely-read literary work is the novel *Nausea* – a work completed in the early 1930s when Sartre was still a teacher in Le Havre. Presented as merely the edited version of materials found among the papers of a certain Antoine Roquentin published “without alteration”, the novel takes the form of a ‘metaphysical journal’ recounting the thoughts and experiences of its supposed author Antoine Roquentin in the town of ‘Bouville’ (often taken to be a fictionalized version of Le Havre itself). Appearing almost as a kind of personal phenomenological report,¹⁹ the novel recounts the increasing sense of revulsion and disgust Roquentin feels towards the world and towards existence. ‘Nausea’ describes this feeling of revulsion – a feeling that is perhaps most vividly presented in Roquentin's description of his encounter with the “black, knotty mass, entirely beastly”

that is the root of a chestnut tree under which he happens to sit.²⁰ In response to this experience of existential *angst*, Roquentin is led to recognize the fundamental absurdity of existence – to recognize, that is, the fact of the absolute contingency of existence and its lack of any inherent meaning or purpose.

The idea of absurdity reappears in Sartre's other works (it can be seen as one of the underlying themes in the short stories that make up *The Wall – Le Mur*, 1939), but increasingly it is the response to absurdity that takes precedence over the mere experience. Indeed, this partly reflects a shift in Sartre's own thinking that occurs during the 1940s, and was made explicit in *What is Literature? (Qu'est-ce que c'est la littérature?)*, 1948), in which Sartre argues for the importance of politically 'committed' or 'engaged' writing. The real question, then, is an ethical one: if human being is characterised by its freedom, as Sartre argues it is, then what is to be done with that freedom? It is this issue, always understood within a political as well as ethical frame, that is the main theme of the series of novels (originally planned as a quartet, although the fourth was never completed) that make up Sartre's *Roads to Freedom*.²¹ The main character in the novels is a teacher, Mathieu Delarue, and much of the narrative deals with the emptiness that attaches to his life in the face of a freedom upon which does not act, and the way in which that freedom is realized through action and commitment. The novel begins in July 1938, with the narrative extending into the period of the War and Occupation,

and draws heavily on Sartre's own war-time experiences (Delarue is thus taken to be a semi-autobiographical figure).

Notwithstanding the significance of his novels, it is Sartre's plays that have generally received greater critical acclaim. *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*, 1943) takes up a theme from the Greek tragedian Aeschylus. Orestes returns as a stranger to his home city, Argos, to take revenge on his mother, Clytemnestra, and his uncle, Aegisthus, for the killing of his father Agamemnon. Here the theme is, indeed, human freedom, and in particular, Orestes' freedom from the Gods, and his taking of responsibility for his own actions, horrific though they may be. *No Exit*, (*Huis-clos*, 1944), one of the best-known of Sartre's plays, portrays the situation of three people who find themselves in hell (which takes the form of a French Second Empire drawing room). They find no torturer waiting for them, however, discovering instead that they are condemned to face one another for eternity without recourse to the usual subterfuges and deceptions that make our life with others bearable – thus “There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is – other people!”²² In *The Devil and the Good Lord* (*Le Diable et le Bon Dieu*, 1951), Sartre's own favourite among his plays, we are presented with a portrayal, in the figure of the medieval warlord Goetz, of the way in which the apparent espousal of good can itself be a disguise for evil.²³

Unlike Sartre, de Beauvoir wrote almost nothing for the stage completing only one play, *Who Shall Die?* (*Les Bouches Inutiles*, 1945), and in addition to her philosophical works and essays, her literary work is instead

focused on short stories,²⁴ a major series of autobiographical writings,²⁵ and, most importantly, her novels. De Beauvoir's work exemplifies, however, a similar sense of political and intellectual engagement to that found in Sartre – as one might expect from one of the founding figures of modern feminism. Moreover, de Beauvoir (who regarded herself as a 'writer' rather than a philosopher) also talked explicitly of the 'metaphysical novel', and defended the 'genre' against other forms.²⁶ Yet there is a significant difference in their way ideas figure in their work: as Andre Maurois writes, although in Sartre's writing philosophy "is the dough itself", in de Beauvoir's it "serves only as leavening, as yeast".²⁷ De Beauvoir's own writing is strongly focused on her characters, their concrete situation, and the events and experiences that form the fabric of their lives. Indeed, it is partly because de Beauvoir is such an accomplished novelist, and her characters and situations carry such a mark of reality upon them, that her work is able to do justice to the sense of *ambiguity* that also lies at the heart of her philosophical work – the nature of human life defies our attempts to give it clear and unequivocal meaning, it is always too multiple, too complex, too uncertain. This also means, however, that the philosophical content of her novels is given in the rich complexity of the events and situations they depict, and not in any simply summarized structure of plot or character.

Human lives are essentially lives lived in relation to others, and almost all of de Beauvoir's literary work focuses on the exploration of the relationality of human life as it is played out in particular and concrete

circumstances. It gives particular attention to the demands such relationality places upon us, and, although not always thematized as such, to the gendered character of the experience of and response to such relationality. It also explores the limitations that are placed on our freedom by the fact of the relations and situations in which we find ourselves.

These themes are particularly clear in *She Came to Stay* (*L'Invitée*, 1943) – the focus of Merleau-Ponty's essay 'Metaphysics and the Novel'.²⁸ *She Came to Stay* deals with the relationship between two people, Pierre and Françoise, as it is disrupted through the introduction of a younger woman, Xavière. The three-way relationship mirrors aspects of the situation involving de Beauvoir, Sartre, and the young Olga Kosakievicz. A key idea in the book is the limited perspective we have on the lives of others – we can only grasp things from the perspective of our own situation – as well as the danger that our relation to others can itself bring. Thus Françoise's relation with Pierre, and also her own sense of self, is threatened by the intrusion of Xavière, finally leading Françoise, in the book's denouement, to the murder of Xavière. *The Blood of Others* (*Les Sang des Autres*, 1945) also centers on the relationship between two people, Jean Blomart and Héléne Bertrand. Set in large part during the early 1940s (around the time at which it was also written),²⁹ the novel provides a detailed portrait of the situated character of human freedom, and the ambiguous and uncertain choices that it sets before us. Jean and Héléne appear as contrasting figures – Jean is politically committed, joining the Communist Party and then the French Resistance, while Héléne is politically

indifferent and self-centred. She is awakened to a sense of political activism, however, and sacrifices her life on a mission for the resistance organisation led by Jean. The novel presents us with the inevitability of responsibility, even for those events over which we can exercise no choice. We are free, but not so free that we can escape our circumstances or the anguish and suffering that they bring.

All Men are Mortal (*Tous les hommes sont mortels*, 1946), de Beauvoir explores our relations to death and to time – but the emphasis is on the way this connects to life. Fosca, the main character in the novel, is immortal, and his immortality is dedicated to the betterment of the world, yet Fosca discovers that his immortality becomes a source of detachment and indifference.³⁰ If there is meaning to be found in human life, it is only to be found, so de Beauvoir suggests, in our involvement *in* life, and not in some abstract perspective on it.

The emptiness of any purely detached perspective, and so also of any intellectual involvement that is not concerned with concrete social and political issues, is also a theme in *The Mandarins* (*Les Mandarins*, 1954) – the novel that won de Beauvoir the prestigious Prix Goncourt. *The Mandarins* is a study of a group of Parisian left-wing intellectuals. As with all of de Beauvoir's work, it is the concrete circumstances and relationships, and the way those relationships play out, that is at the centre of the work. In the case of *The Mandarins*, the narrative that is presented is all the more dense and multi-layered, since it concerns what was essentially the contemporary

situation – personal and existential, political and intellectual – in which de Beauvoir and Sartre were themselves enmeshed in the post-war years (the novel is often viewed, therefore, as a *roman à clef* – a novel that fictionalizes a group of real people). It thus continues de Beauvoir’s preoccupation with the concrete situatedness of literary and philosophical inquiry, as well as the ambiguity and complexity that it brings forth, while it also exemplifies the ‘metaphysical’ novel as itself a novel of *engagement*.

5. ‘A Philosophy in Images’: Camus and the Search for Lucidity

It would be impossible to discuss existentialism from the perspective of literature without giving attention to the work of Albert Camus. Camus’ 1942 novel *The Outsider* (*L’Étranger* – there is no exact translation into English, with the American edition of the work titled ‘The Stranger’ and the English ‘The Outsider’) is perhaps the best known and most widely read work of ‘existentialist’ fiction, and, together with the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1939), it is perhaps the most widely read existentialist work of all, whether literary or philosophical. That Camus is arguably, with the possible exception of Beckett, the most important, as well as the best known, literary figure within the existentialist canon provides good reason for attending more closely to him here.³¹ Yet it also has to be said that within existentialism, if he was indeed ever ‘within’ it in the first place, Camus also represents something of an anomalous figure, being himself an ‘outsider’, in virtue both of personal background as well as philosophical commitment.³²

Not only is Camus more familiar as a writer than as a philosopher (and although he preferred to style himself as such, he nevertheless also wrote that “a novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images”³³), but his philosophical position stands somewhat apart from that of other existentialists, notably from that of Sartre. Moreover, as we saw above, his work is sometimes viewed as having little or no philosophical relevance. Yet just as one cannot omit Camus from any discussion of literary existentialism, neither should he be omitted from the philosophical discussion of existentialism. Indeed, there is increasing critical attention now being paid to Camus as a philosopher and a writer. To some extent, this is due to the revival of interest in Camus’ political views and his stance against the politics of violence – issues that have taken on a new resonance in the light of the contemporary rise of terrorism and the supposed ‘war on terror’ – but it also seems likely to be a measure of the strength of Camus as a writer, of the direct and personal style of his writing, and of the way in which his work as a whole, the critical and lyrical no less than the fictional, has remained relevant and accessible to a contemporary readership.

In contrast to the middle class backgrounds of Sartre and de Beauvoir, Albert Camus came from a poor working class family, growing up in the city of Algiers in what was then the French colony of Algeria. His father was killed in the First World War, and Camus was brought up by his mother and grandmother. Helped by the teacher to whom he later dedicated his Nobel Prize, Louis Germain, Camus found his way to the University of Algiers

where he studied philosophy from 1932-36 with Jean Grenier as his teacher. Grenier was a philosopher who focused on the concrete particularities of experience, as well as being something of a mystic, a lover of the Greeks, and a writer whose work was mainly in essay form.³⁴ In 1935 Camus began his *Notebooks (Carnets)*, published under that title in 1951), and by 1938 had decided on a career as a journalist writing initially for the paper *Alger-Républicain* and then moving to France in 1939. By 1942 he had become involved with the French Resistance and was editing the underground newsheet *Combat*. The publication of *The Outsider* in the early 1940s established his literary reputation, as did performances of his plays from 1944 onwards. The publication of Camus' *The Rebel (L'Homme révolté)*, 1951) led to a public quarrel between Camus and Sartre and a breach between them that was never healed. In 1957 Camus became the youngest French writer ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. At the time of his death, in 1960, he was working on what was to be a major novel with the title *The First Man (Le Premier Homme)*, 1994) – a strongly autobiographical novel that was published posthumously in an edition edited by Camus' daughter Cathérine.³⁵

Camus left behind a much smaller legacy of works than did Sartre – partly as a consequence of his early death, but also a result of his own difficulties in writing, particularly in the period leading up to his fatal car accident (one of the ironies, in fact, is that the accident occurred at a time when Camus had once again begun working on a new project – the draft of the posthumously published *The First Man* being with him in his briefcase

when he died). Camus' work ranges across novels, short stories, plays, essays, and one major philosophical treatise which is, of course, *The Rebel*. A great deal of his writing is also in the form of journalistic contributions, including those written for the wartime newspaper which he also edited, *Combat*.

Camus' most famous work is undoubtedly *The Outsider* – that “clear, dry work,” as Sartre described it,³⁶ whose popularity has extended well beyond the 1940s when it was first published.³⁷ *The Outsider* tells the story of Meursault, a clerk living in French colonial Algiers, who meets each day with a leaden indifference and inability to feel – an indifference that he seems incapable of hiding or covering up. What seems to matter most to Meursault – almost all he seems to care about in fact – are issues of physical comfort or preference (coffee at his mother's funeral, the pleasure of swimming). The novel narrates the events leading up to Meursault's murder of an unnamed Arab on a beach,³⁸ the subsequent trial and Meursault's conviction, and what occurs in the time during which Meursault awaits his execution. Meursault appears as an outsider, not in virtue of his status or position (he is neither a writer nor a foreigner), but because of his inability to participate in the dissemblance that keeps absurdity at bay. In the end Meursault finds redemption through the lucid recognition of the absurdity of his situation and the discovery that it does not matter. He finds a certain happiness, and even exultation, in the mere fact of existence and the experience of the world – a happiness that he realizes had been his all along.

The Stranger forms part of a trilogy of early works that were written in 1938-1941 and that includes the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* as well as the play *Caligula* (1944 – written in 1938).³⁹ These three works all explore the idea of the absurd and the human response to it – a response that Camus characterizes most often (in the later works as well as the earlier) in terms of *rebellion* or *revolt*. In *Caligula*, Camus begins the story just after the death of Drusilla, Caligula's sister and lover. Brought by her death to recognition of the absurdity of things, Caligula decides to exhibit that absurdity in his own actions embarking on a reign characterized by caprice as well as brutality. Caligula thus finds a certain 'happiness' in the face of absurdity, but it is, as he says, of a murderous kind, and the play ends with his own assassination.

While the works that Camus completed during the late 1930s and early 1940s focus largely on the situation of the individual and their response to absurdity – so that Camus seems to ignore, for instance, the moral issues relating to the murder that occurs in *The Outsider* – the works that come after are much more concerned with the individual as he or she stands in relation to others. Thus while the focus in the earlier works is on one's own death or the loss to oneself in the death of a lover (in 'The Myth of Sisyphus', the question of one's own suicide), in the later works it is one's complicity in and response to the death and suffering of others that is primary.⁴⁰

The latter theme is explored in two of Camus' immediate postwar plays *State of Siege* (*L'État de siège*, 1948), and *The Just Assassins* (*Les Justes*, 1950). *State of Siege* is set in the Spanish town of Cadiz and centers on the

establishment and eventual overthrow of a dictatorial regime in the town – a regime that also brings plague along with it. *The Just Assassins* is a dramatization based on events surrounding the attempt to assassinate the Grand Duke Sergei Romanov in 1905, and explores questions of revolt and idealism, violence and humanity. The group of revolutionaries on whom the play centres (almost all based on real historical figures) are divided over their willingness to enact murder to advance their cause, and, in particular, to countenance even the deaths of children as a possible consequence of their attempts to advance their cause.

Camus' second novel *The Plague* (*La Peste*, 1947) is, in terms of its themes, similar to *The Just Assassins*, and especially to *State of Siege* – although the development of those themes in the novel as opposed to either of the plays, including *State of Siege*, is also quite different. Narrated by one of the town's doctors, Bernard Rieux, who leads the fight against the disease, (although the fact that he is the narrator remains hidden until near the book's end), *The Plague* tells of an outbreak of bubonic plague in the Algerian port town of Oran. Here Camus' concern is not so much with absurdity as with suffering, and the necessity of the revolt against it. Indeed, the evident parallels that the novel implicitly suggests between the plague and the German Occupation of France (which, in 1947, had only recently been ended) clearly indicates the way in which what is at issue is the resistance to tyranny and the refusal of evil. That evil, and the refusal of evil, is indeed central to the novel is made especially clear by Rieux's echoing of Alyosha's reply to

Ivan in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov* (something also evident in *The Just Assassins*).⁴¹ Responding to the Jesuit Father Paneloux's advice, following the death of a child, that "we must love what we cannot understand", Rieux replies: "No Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture."⁴² This rejection of suffering, and of the violence that often underlies it, is a central element in Camus' later thought, constituting the core of the humane and democratic politics of which he was a staunch advocate.⁴³ It is also indicative, of course, of one of the issues on which Camus and Sartre stand in sharp contrast to one another.

If *the Plague* appears uncompromising and unambiguous in the response to evil that it urges upon us, Camus' next novel, *The Fall* (*La Chute*, 1956), seems to present a more uncertain picture. The central character of *The Fall* is the ex-lawyer Jean-Baptiste Clamence. We first meet Clamence in an Amsterdam bar, and the novel is told as if we, the reader, were his interlocutor (or witness to just one side of an ongoing dialogue) in a developing series of encounters during which he narrates the story of his life. The key event in that life – the event that set Clamence on the path to his self-proclaimed role as a 'judge-penitent' (a title the meaning of which only becomes clear as the novel draws to a close) – was his failure, many years before, to intervene in the night-time suicide of a young woman from a Parisian bridge. The event eventually leads Clamence to turn his back on his

old life, and take up residence in Amsterdam where he ostensibly devotes himself to the welfare of those he meets.

While it seems as if Clamence is being remarkably frank about his own situation, about his duplicity and moral cowardice – as if he were a model of lucidity – it finally becomes evident that he tells his story with the aim of holding up a mirror to his interlocutors, thereby demonstrating their own moral inadequacy. Thus Clamence relieves his own moral burden by drawing attention to the burden that is carried by others. Clamence thus appears as the opposite to Meursault in *The Outsider*: while Meursault seems incapable of hiding his indifference, remaining, in this respect, truthful, in Clamence we find a man who, in spite of the appearance of truthfulness, seems to be entirely dishonest.⁴⁴ A complex work, and not only in the form of its construction, *The Fall*, has been variously interpreted – although no single interpretation seems adequate to the work as a whole. There is no doubt that elements of Camus' own life and character are incorporated into the figure of Clamence, and the novel also seems to depict the general loss of clarity and moral ambiguity that is frequently taken to be characteristic of modernity.⁴⁵ Yet the novel is often read as an ironic commentary on the existentialist position itself, and especially on the existentialism of Sartre – an existentialism that appears as preoccupied with individual authenticity, but incapable of recognizing its own insincerity, in which guilt is universal, but also, therefore, meaningless.⁴⁶

In addition to the novels and plays, Camus also published a volume of short stories, *Exile and the Kingdom* (*Exil et la Royaume*, 1957), and three volumes of lyrical essays, *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* (*L'Envers et L'Endroit*, 1937), *Nuptials* (*Noces*, 1939), and *Summer* (*L'Été*, 1954). Although often overlooked, these essays, with their often highly evocative descriptions of particular places (frequently of places in Camus' native Algeria), are an essential part of his work. Indeed, the very sense of light and sun that pervades so many of these essays seems to exemplify the search for lucidity and clarity that itself seems to drive so much of Camus' thinking and writing – even though, in his return to these places, the demand for lucidity seems overtaken by a sense of concrete situatedness that itself resists complete elucidation.

What moves Camus more than anything else it seems, underpinning his own insistence on the need for the renunciation of violence and recognition of life as the only real value,⁴⁷ is the sense of our being bound to the earth, to sea and to sun, to a finite and fragile existence that always stands under the shadow of death, and yet nevertheless allows of a certain happiness. As Camus writes in the essay 'Nuptials at Tipasa': "it is my life that I am staking here, a life that tastes of warm stone and the sound of the crickets".⁴⁸ It is this that brings Camus closer to late Heidegger than to Sartre, and that is expressed in his insistence on his status as a writer rather than a philosopher, as well as in his rejection of metaphysical pretensions or otherworldly hopes – "The only proofs must be ones that we can touch".⁴⁹

The theme is also one that is partly developed in the incomplete and posthumously published *The First Man* (*Le Premier Homme*, 1994). Containing similarly evocative descriptions that draw on Camus' own life and experience, the novel explores the character of a life as worked out in relation to the places in which it is lived. While Camus' refusal of violence and his emphasis on the necessity for a politics of dialogue was a part of what motivated his stance on the Algerian question, his position was also underpinned by his own sense of belonging and of place, his own sense of being *Algerian*.⁵⁰

6. 'The Suffering of Being': Beckett and Absurdism

Existentialism and Absurdism are often viewed as closely connected developments. Camus is one figure who stands at their intersection, although his place there is by no means an unequivocal one, while Sartre too can be seen as having an important and influential role in the development of absurdist drama, particular in relation to Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) who is perhaps its central figure. While absurdism is indeed primarily located in the theatre, with its key works being plays such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*,⁵¹ Beckett was himself extremely productive as a novelist, short story writer and poet, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.

The idea of the 'theatre of the absurd' is itself a creation of the American literary critic Martin Esslin, and was set forth by Esslin in his

influential book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Esslin includes under this heading not only Beckett, but also Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet and a list of other 'avant-garde' figures including Max Frisch, Günter Grass, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee, all of whom objected to their categorization in this way. The concept of the absurd already appears in the work of André Malraux who wrote in 1925 of an "essential absurdity" that lies at the centre of European man,⁵² and the idea clearly has its origins in the Surrealist movement in the early part of the century.

The absurd appears, as we have seen, in the work of both Camus and Sartre (although Sartre argues that Camus' use of the term is different from his⁵³). Yet according to Esslin, while Camus and Sartre "present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning", the Theatre of the Absurd "strives to express the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought."⁵⁴ In this respect, one of the most important devices in absurdist drama, and, indeed, in absurdist writing generally, is its use of humour. Thus Beckett's plays, while presenting a bleak picture of the human condition, are also full of jokes, verbal plays, and even pratfalls. In this respect, one might argue that absurdism is true to its name, not only in being 'without sense', but in as much as it is often extremely funny – the only problem is that the joke is always, as it were, on us.

Not only is Beckett the best known figure within absurdism (even though he contests his inclusion within it), but his work is also closest in its concerns to that of writers such as Sartre and Camus. Although, as I have already noted, Beckett was a prolific writer across a range of genres (his literary career began in 1929 and continued until his death in 1989), it is undoubtedly his plays that are the best-known of his works. In particular, *Waiting for Godot* (*En attendant Godot* – the play was written and first published in French – 1952) has entered into popular culture as have few other works outside of Shakespeare.

Waiting for Godot was famously described by one newspaper critic as “a play in which nothing happens, twice”, and yet which nevertheless keeps audiences glued to their seats.⁵⁵ Organized into two acts that share an almost identical structure, the play centers on two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, joined for part of each Act by two other characters, Pozzo and his servant Lucky, as they wait over two consecutive days for the arrival of another character who never appears, whose identity remains obscure, and who neither Estragon nor Vladimir actually seems to know. The action, inasmuch as there is any, is without conclusion or resolution, and even the conversation constantly breaks down or is interrupted. The play is filled, not only with jokes, but also with strange words, biblical allusions, philosophical ruminations, and comments on the bleakness and futility of human life. The absurdity of existence is thus presented with no mitigation of that absurdity,

and language itself starts to seem meaningless, and incapable of carrying any significance. The only possible response, it would seem, is to laugh.

In *Endgame* (*Fin de partie*, 1957), we encounter another pair of odd characters, Hamm, who is old, blind and unable to stand, and his young servant Clov, who cannot sit down. Also present are Hamm's legless parents, Ned and Nell, who live in nearby rubbish bins. The play seems to be set in a time when there is little left to the world, and its title suggests an allusion to the final stage in a game of chess. The play is, it seems, about endings, and the vain struggle against such endings, although the ending at issue seems to be one that could easily slip by almost unnoticed (as does the death of Nell). In *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), a one act monologue, we watch Krapp in his study on the evening of his sixty-ninth birthday as he does what he does every year - record himself as he reflects on the year gone by and listen to his past recordings. This time he listens to the one he recorded when he was thirty-nine, and we see the contrast, as does Krapp himself, between the man he as then, and who he is now, between his hopes and expectations, and the reality that has been realized, and we seem to see death standing behind him in the shadows.

What draws Beckett's work close to that of existentialists such as Sartre is not only his preoccupation with the idea of the absurd, but also his bleak portrayal of the human situation - a portrayal that characterizes his novels and other works no less than his plays. Yet, unlike Sartre, Beckett seems to see little room for either freedom or political engagement. Instead Beckett's work

carries instead a strong sense of inevitable failure, and of the complete inability of language or thought to make sense of the world in which we find ourselves or even adequately to speak about the reality that confronts us. In this respect, Beckett is perhaps closer to Camus than to either Sartre or de Beauvoir, although for Beckett there is no possibility of the sort of rebellious affirmation in the face of absurdity on which Camus places such emphasis. If Camus' work is ultimately about the value of human life and the possibility of happiness in spite of the inevitability of death, in Beckett, it is failure and death – “the suffering of being”⁵⁶ – and the ridiculous absurdity of existence that seem to be paramount.

7. Parallels and Successors: Hesse to Kundera

The term ‘existentialist’ is, as we saw earlier, often used in an expanded sense that encompasses much of modern literature as well as literature from past centuries. Such an expanded usage is obviously problematic. Yet while there is only a relatively small number of writers whose work can reasonably be characterised as ‘existentialist’, and some of those arguably so, there are many more writers who have produced individual works that may be thought to have a stronger claim to be part of the existentialist canon, or whose work itself stands in a significant relation of influence to existentialist literature more narrowly conceived. This would seem to be true of specific works by Tolstoy and Hamsun, already considered briefly above, and there are a

number of works by other writers to which this might be thought to apply also.

Within German literature, in particular, the work of Herman Hesse (1877-1962) is particularly notable. Hesse was himself influenced by Hamsun, but perhaps less by any nascent existentialist elements in his work, as by his romanticism and individualism. The influence of Dostoyevsky is also evident in some of Hesse's writing, and the work that has perhaps the best claim to be viewed as standing in a close proximity to existentialist literature, if not a part of it, is Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf* (*Der Steppenwolf*, 1927), which itself echoes themes from the work of the great Russian writer. Hesse's work, and especially *Steppenwolf*, became extremely popular within the counter-culture of the nineteen-sixties (its popularity great enough to provide the name for the rock band whose music played a key part in the film *Easy Rider*). As with Sartre's *Nausea*, *Steppenwolf* is presented to the reader as made up of a set of papers found among the effects of the novel's main character, a writer by the name of Harry Haller. Like many existentialist figures, Haller is divided within himself in a way that threatens his sense of identity and his sanity – in Haller's case, he finds himself torn between two natures or modes of being, that of a man, an ordinary member of society, and that of a wolf of the steppes, beastly and antisocial. Containing a number of what appear to be hallucinatory scenes, as well as a series of encounters with a woman, Hermine, who also seems to be, in some way, a creation of or counterpart to Haller's own psyche, the novel explores themes of alienation, psychological

disintegration and discovery that draw on Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, and Kafka, although they are also influenced by the ideas of Carl Jung.

Within American literature, there are a number of essayists, novelists, poets and playwrights, who have produced individual works that have a strongly existentialist orientation or provenance or whose work otherwise stands in a close relation to the existentialist tradition. Sartre himself wrote on the work of a number of American writers who he saw as literary influences on his work and that of his contemporaries – Hemingway, Dos Passos, Faulkner – but while he acknowledges their importance, he does not view them as existentialists, nor should he have done so.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, one can find in these writers themes that certainly mirror those that appear in existentialist writing elsewhere, and the work of Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), in particular, is often cited in discussions of existentialism as a literary form. Hemingway's 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' (1926) can be read as providing a succinct statement of existential alienation, while Hemingway's repetition in the story of the Spanish word for 'nothing' – *nada* – also has clear existentialist resonances.⁵⁸

The work of writers such as Harlan Ellison (1934-) and Norman Mailer (1923-2007) provide obvious points of contact between existentialism as it appears in European literature, as do the plays of Arthur Miller (1915-2005). Existentialism provided a way of engaging with an emerging sense of alienation in American life, whether under the influence of consumer capitalism or the experience of social exclusion on the part of African-

Americans. The Beat movement of the 1950s, exemplified in the work of writers such as Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) and Alan Ginsberg (1926-1997) clearly shows the influence of existentialist thought and writing – particularly the work of Camus, whose prose style has obvious affinities (as Sartre himself noted) with that of American writers such as Hemingway who were themselves an influence on the Beats. In an early article on the ‘Beat Generation’ in 1952, John Clellon Holmes characterised it in a way that was certainly suggestive of existentialist themes: “It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself”.⁵⁹ Yet as Holmes himself noted, the Beats were a broad and ill-defined group, encompassing a wide range of ideas and approaches, as well as an eclectic set of influences. In fact, the development of the Beats draws as much on Zen Buddhist thought, as on the literary existentialism of Camus or Sartre, and was undoubtedly even more strongly influenced, as was the work of such as Ellison and Mailer also, by tendencies and movements already present within American culture.⁶⁰

Among more recent European writing, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* ((*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 1984) by Czech writer Milan Kundera (1929-), stands in a close relationship to the existentialist literary tradition, and seems to reflect ideas and themes present in a number of earlier writers from Dostoevsky to Camus. The novel begins with begins a reflection on Nietzsche’s myth of the eternal recurrence, ‘the heaviest of all burdens, as

Nietzsche characterises it. If recurrence, the continual living of one's life again and again, is the heaviest of burdens, then the singular happening, the fact that one lives one's life but once, is surely the lightest. The novel deals with the intertwined lives and relationships of two couples, Tomáš and Tereza (as well as their dog, Karenin), and Franz and Sabina, in the period following the Prague Spring of 1968. As it explores the fragility and singularity of the lives and relationships of its main characters, so the novel explores and illuminates that which is also referred to in its title: the 'unbearable lightness' of being.

While it may not be an 'existentialist' work as such, Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* nevertheless constitutes an excellent example of the literary exploration of existence that is also exemplified in, but not restricted to, existentialist works. Such explorations are characteristic of much modern (and post-modern) literature, so that modernity might itself be characterised in terms of the uncertainty that it gives to the human situation. In this respect, existentialist literature can be viewed as one expression of what is an essentially modern tendency- a tendency, it should be said, that is not dissipated by any move to the 'post-modern'. Moreover, as can be seen most clearly in the work of Sartre and de Beauvoir, as well as in Beckett, in the literary exploration of existence, it is literature itself that is also at issue. The question concerning the relation between existentialism and literature is thus not only an issue about the nature of existentialism, but also about the nature of literature.

Notes and References

- ¹ Throughout this essay, the year of first publication of a work is given in brackets following the title of the work, and, in the case of foreign language works, together with the title as given in the original language in which the work first appeared.
- ² Cooper, *Existentialism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2nd edn. 1999), p.8.
- ³ One might argue, as I think Cooper is inclined to do, that existentialism and existential phenomenology are co-extensive terms, but there seems to be good reason to distinguish between the two – certainly to assume a straightforward identity here is already to prejudice the case against the possibility that existentialism might also constitute itself as literature (unless, as Murdoch suggests in the quotation below, one takes literature as itself a form of phenomenology), while one might also argue for the possibility of a mode of phenomenology that does indeed thematize the existential and yet is not existentialist.
- ⁴ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.44.
- ⁵ Iris Murdoch writes that “The novelist proper is, in his way, a sort of phenomenologist”, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Fontana, 1967), p.9.
- ⁶ While there have been attempts to enlist a range of thinkers from Augustine to Pascal within existentialist ranks, more serious argument over the *philosophical* scope of existentialism has generally focussed on the extent to which the term applies beyond the small group clustered around Sartre and de Beauvoir (or even whether it applies to anyone other than Sartre himself), and the extent to which it

properly includes Kierkegaard (the figure most regularly seen as the founder of existentialism as it refers to a philosophical position that encompasses more than the Sartrean), and Nietzsche, Jaspers and Heidegger.

⁷ That these terms are indeed distinct should be clear from even the most cursory consideration (for a brief elaboration of the point see the discussion below), but it is surprising how frequently the terms are conflated. Of course, given existentialism's concern with human existence, so existentialist works will exhibit a concern with the existential, but the fact that *existential* concerns figure in a work cannot be sufficient for that work to be viewed as *existentialist*.

⁸ "1693 tr. Barlow's *Exercit.* i. Rem. 483 Enjoying the good of existence and the being deprived of that existential good", *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn. 1989), Vol. V, p.543.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Although not discussed here, Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) was as productive a playwright as a philosopher, viewing his dramatic works as just as important an expression of his ideas as his philosophical writing. In spite of receiving a number of literary prizes and awards during his lifetime, however, his work for the theatre has never achieved the same international recognition as that of Sartre or Camus. Marcel's plays include *A Man of God* (*Un Homme de Dieu*, 1923) *The Broken World* (*Le Monde Cassé*, 1932), and *Ariadne* (*Le Chemin de Crête - 'The Cretan Way'* - 1936). Marcel is notable as an example of a writer who adopts a specifically religious version of existentialism (and is thus closer to Kierkegaard) in contrast to Sartre, in particular, who was quite explicit as to the atheistic presuppositions of his thinking.

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- ¹¹ Sartre himself situates Camus in direct relation to Voltaire – see Sartre, ‘Camus’ *The Outsider*, *Literary Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p.41.
- ¹² One might argue that where there is an impetus towards literary expression in German philosophy, it is, in fact, an impetus that derives from and is associated with romanticism rather than existentialism.
- ¹³ Walter Kaufman, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1989), pp.12 & 14.
- ¹⁴ See *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book V, Chapt. 5.
- ¹⁵ “‘Rebellion? I don’t like hearing such a word from you,’ Ivan said with feeling. ‘One can hardly live by rebellion, and I want to live. Tell me straight out, I call on you – answer me: imagine that you yourself are building the fabric of human destiny with the object of making people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and raise your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears – would you agree to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me the truth.’”, Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), pp.245.
- ¹⁶ For Camus, the circumstances were those of the Algerian War (1954–1962) by which Algeria won its independence from France – a war characterised by terrorism and counter-terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and the use of torture, terrorism. The same circumstances now seen to be mirrored in our own time of ‘global terror’.

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- ¹⁷ A juxtaposition that is oddly present in the bibliography of Kafka's own writing which includes, among his 'Office Writings', such works as 'The Scope of Compulsory Insurance for the Building Trades' (1908), and 'Measures for Preventing Accidents from Wood-Planing Machines' (1910).
- ¹⁸ As well as being the translation, in the English edition, of the title of Camus' *L'Étranger*, 'The Outsider' was also the title for a popular and notorious work of the 1950s by the writer Colin Wilson (*The Outsider*, London, Gollancz, 1956). Wilson presented the outsider as *the* figure of modernity, providing both fictional and real-life examples of this figure. Wilson drew heavily on existentialist writing, but also on a wide range of other sources, and including figures as diverse as Sartre, H. G. Wells, T. E. Lawrence, George Bernard Shaw, William Blake, and G. I. Gurdjieff.
- ¹⁹ "Keep a diary to see clearly - let none of the nuances or small happenings escape even though they might seem to mean nothing. And above all classify them. I must tell how I see this table, this street, the people..." , Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Hamilton (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p.7.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.170-173.
- ²¹ *Roads to Freedom* comprises *The Age of Reason* (*L'Âge de raison*, 1945), *The Reprieve* (*Le Sursis*, 1947), and *Troubled Sleep* (*La Mort dans l'Âme*, literally 'Death in the Soul', 1949), the fourth novel was to have been titled *A Strange Friendship* (*Drôle d'amitié*).
- ²² *No Exit and The Flies*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p.61.
- ²³ Sartre's other plays include: *The Respectful Prostitute* (*Le Putain Respecteuse*, 1946); *Dirty Hands* (*Les Mains Sales*; 1948); and *The Condemned of Altona* (*Les Séquestrés d'Altona*, 1959).

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- ²⁴ *When Things of the Spirit Come First – Quand Prime le Spirituel*, written in the 1930s, but not published until 1979; and *The Woman Destroyed – La Femme Rompue*, 1967.
- ²⁵ Including her three part autobiography, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter (Mémoires d'une Jeune Fille Rangée*, 1958), *The Prime of Life (La Force de l'Âge*, 1960), *The Force of Circumstance (La Force des Choses*, 1963 – two vols), as well as *A Very Easy Death (Une Mort très Douce*, 1964), concerning the death of her mother, and *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre (La Cérémonie des Adieux*, 1981).
- ²⁶ See 'Literature and Metaphysics' (1946) in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmermann and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 261-277.
- ²⁷ Andre Maurois, *From Proust to Camus. Profiles of Modern French Writers*, trans. Carl Morse and Renaud Bruce (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p.330.
- ²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Metaphysics and the Novel' (1945), in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp.26-40.
- ²⁹ Since the novel reveals de Beauvoir's sympathies with the French Resistance, it was written in the knowledge that it could not be published until after the German Occupation had ended.
- ³⁰ The issues of time, old age, and death become increasingly important in de Beauvoir's writing, especially in her autobiographical works.
- ³¹ Even this *Companion* devotes major chapters to the latter two figures, but contains no such extended discussion of Camus' work. As a result, his treatment here should be viewed as attempting to provide a small corrective to Camus' relative *philosophical* neglect (not a neglect, it should be pointed out, mirrored in literature).

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- ³² Sartre referred to *The Outsider* as itself a work that comes to the French reader from 'outside' – see Sartre, 'Camus' *The Outsider*', p.24.
- ³³ Camus, 'Review of *La Nausée* by Jean-Paul Sartre', *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. ed. Philip Thody, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967), p.145.
- ³⁴ For the correspondence between Camus and Grenier, which provides some record of their relationship, see *Albert Camus and Jean Grenier: Correspondence, 1932-1960* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).
- ³⁵ For more on Camus' life, see the biography by Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997).
- ³⁶ 'Camus' "The Outsider"', p.41. *The Outsider* was foreshadowed in an earlier abandoned novel, *A Happy Death* (*La Mort Hereuse*, 1971), written between 1936 and 1938, which also centres on a murder by a clerk named Meursault.
- ³⁷ So that even in the 1980s it could be the inspiration for a hit pop song – 'Killing an Arab' by The Cure – a song whose title (referring to the pivotal incident in the novel) led to it being banned by the BBC
- ³⁸ That the novel contains an apparently colonialist sub-text was first pointed out by Conor Cruise O'Brien in 'Camus, Algeria, and "The Fall"', *New York Review of Books* (9 October 1969), pp. 6, 8, 10-12.
- ³⁹ The sequence should probably also be taken to include the play written by Camus in 1943, *Cross Purpose* (*Le Malentendu*, 1944), whose plot is prefigured in a newspaper story mentioned by Meursault in *The Outsider*.
- ⁴⁰ Camus himself charts out the movement in his thinking in terms of a shift from the question of suicide to that of murder (see Camus, *Carnets 1942-1951*, trans. Philip Thody, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966, p.97) as well as by reference to three figures from Greek mythology: Sisyphus, Prometheus, and Nemesis. The problem

that Sisyphus exemplifies is that of the individual in an absurd situation (Sisyphus' task in Hades is to roll a huge rock to the top of a hill, but the rock is back at the bottom every morning); Prometheus exemplifies rebellion in the face of absurdity and evil (it is he who steals fire from the Gods, and teaches human beings the arts of civilization); Nemesis is the symbol of our essential finitude, and so also of our concrete human situatedness, especially as that is evident in our relation to others (she is the goddess who punishes those who overstep the proper limits – see Camus, *Carnets 1942-1951*, p.168).

⁴¹ See the passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* quoted in note 12 above – it is notable that this passage appears in the chapter titled 'Rebellion'.

⁴² Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p.178.

⁴³ See Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), for a discussion of Camus's political thought alongside that of Hannah Arendt – Isaacs sees both as holding to a similarly 'rebellious politics'.

⁴⁴ Indeed, he has, he says, "accepted duplicity instead of being upset by it", *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p.103.

⁴⁵ Clamence is "a false prophet for mediocre times", Camus, *Oeuvres Complètes: I Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, ed. Roger Quilliot (Paris: Pléiade, 1962), p.1533.

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the various readings at issue here see David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Temple University Press, 1988), pp.202-217.

⁴⁷ Something that is clearly evident in the essays and other works that follow on from the writings of the absurd that characterize Camus work in the early 1940s

⁴⁸ *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p.69.

⁴⁹ Camus, *Carnets 1942-1951*, p.9

⁵⁰ "Algeria...is my true country", Camus, 'Short Guide for Cities Without a Past', *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p.114. On the idea of the relation to place as a central issue for philosophical thinking (an idea that can be seen to be implicit in much existentialist writing especially through its emphasis on human finitude and situatedness), see Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁵¹ Eugène Ionesco (born Eugen Ionescu, 1909-1994) is the next best-known figure connected with Absurdism after Beckett. His most celebrated plays include the short works *The Bald Soprano* (*La Cantatrice chauve*, 1950), *The Lesson* (*La Leçon*, 1951), *The Chairs* (*Les Chaises*, 1952), and *Jack, or The Submission* (*Jacques ou la Soumission*, 1955), as well as the full-length plays *The Killer* (*Tueur sans gages*, 1959), and *Rhinoceros* (*Rhinocéros*, 1959). Like Beckett, Ionesco also produced a number of novels and works of poetry

⁵² Malraux, *The Temptation of the West* (1926), (New York: Vintage, 1961), p.00.

⁵³ "For [Camus] the absurd the absurd arises from the relation between man and the world, between man's rational demands and the world's irrationality. The themes which he derives from it are those of classical pessimism. I do not recognize the absurd in the sense of scandal and disillusionment that Camus attributes to it. What I call the absurd is something very different: it is the universal contingency of being which is, but which is not the basis of its being; the absurd is the given, unjustifiable, primordial quality of existence", quoted by John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, p.45), from Christian Grisoli, 'Entretien avec Jean-Paul Sartre', *Paru* 13 (December, 1945), p.5-10.

⁵⁴ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), pp.xix-xx

⁵⁵ Vivian Mercier, *Irish Times*, 18 February, 1956, p. 6

⁵⁶ Beckett, *Proust* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p.8.

⁵⁷ See especially Sartre's essay on Dos Passos, 'John Dos Passos and "1919"' (1936), reprinted in *Literary Essays*, pp.88-96.

⁵⁸ See John Killinger, *Hemingway and the Dead Gods: A Study in Existentialism* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1960), for an attempted, although unconvincing, portrayal of Hemingway's work as a whole as existentialist in character.

⁵⁹ John Clellon Holmes, 'This Is the Beat Generation,' *The New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1952, reprinted in Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare* (New York: Dutton, 1967), p. 110.

⁶⁰ See George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), for an excellent exploration of the impact of existentialism on American thought and culture. Cotkin shows how American writers were drawn into the conversation inaugurated by existentialists in Europe, but he also makes clear the way in which existentialism's impact in America connected with a strong tradition of existing existential concerns.