**‘Forgive me reader, for I have sinned’:**

***Disponibilité* and Confession in the Works of Albert Camus**

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***Abstract***

In this article I assess the effects of confessional writing as a philosophical and literary technique, as used by Albert Camus*.* Drawing on Gabriel Marcel’s concept of *disponibilité*, I suggest that confessional writing is used as a means of bringing about an intersubjective experience of the Other. The unmediated and vulnerable communication of this form of writing acts in place of the direct, second-person communication we experience in the real world, and the reader is thus situated in a phenomenological space where their empathetic and emotional responses are fully engaged, as if in intimate conversation. With a view to this aim, I draw not only on Marcel’s work, but also on classic philosophical life writing, including that of Saint Augustine of Hippo and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—all of which can be seen as inspiration for the development of this element of Camus’ writing style. I suggest that, for Camus, the openness we experience in encountering a narrative text is of moral significance, as it encourages to reflect on the suffering and inner lives of others in a way that otherwise might not be possible, and from this activity we may improve our moral acuity. In bringing together both fictionalised autobiography, and philosophical confessional literature, this article endeavours to give the first ever full account of Camus’ vision of the role of life writing in relation to philosophy.

1. ***Introduction***

Despite the esteem with which the literary works of Albert Camus are regarded, an essential element to his œuvre has all but been overlooked—that is, his recurrent use of philosophical life writing, both factual and fictional[[1]](#endnote-1).The following article is an attempt to rectify this deficiency, drawing on Gabriel Marcel’s concept of *disponibilité* as a means of unpacking Camus’ own use of philosophical life writing.To readers who are familiar with the works of Gabriel Marcel and Albert Camus, it might seem somewhat strange to marry their ideas, as I will do in this article. Gabriel Marcel was famously a devout Catholic, and the majority of his philosophical thinking, when not addressing the question of religious belief directly, at the very least incorporates it as a foundation for further investigation. Camus on the other hand, is most famous for his work on the absurd, a concept which takes the godlessness of the universe for granted. Indeed, as George Heffernan illustrates in a wonderfully insightful article on their relationship, their philosophical differences were aired very publicly, most substantially in Marcel’s *Homo Viator*, in which he is deeply critical of Camus’ philosophical venture (Heffernan 2016, 70)[[2]](#endnote-2). While it is not possible in the current article to do justice to the complexity of the relationship between these two thinkers (and in many ways, there is little need following Heffernan’s estimable analysis), I will suggest that aside from their difference in theological belief, there is a key similarity between the two which merits my venture here: both Marcel and Camus espouse the need for an ethical response to the questions raised by existentialism; that is to say, that both of these authors investigate how morality might still be meaningful in light of existentialism’s posited ‘meaninglessness’. It is this common ground which motivates my argument in the current article.

To set philosophical content aside for a moment, these two thinkers have even more in common when it comes to their unusual philosophical styles. Some of Marcel’s most interesting work consists in philosophical autobiography and confessional diaries (such as ‘A Metaphysical Diary’, and ‘An Essay in Autobiography’), which gives his writing an unusual personal quality. Camus’ philosophical novels are of course somewhat different, and use a variety of narrative techniques, but just about all his creative works use elements of either confessional writing or philosophical autobiography, lending concrete and poignant examples to their ethical content. I suggest that by composing their philosophical texts in this manner, these writers (including the fictional ones) declare themselves (in Marcellian terms) as ‘present’, allowing for a relationship of *disponibilité* between author and reader. The following section (§2) will therefore examine precisely what is meant by these terms, and look at some examples from Marcel’s own confessional works. §3 will cast a look back at some classic philosophical life writing that no doubt inspired Camus’ own, in order to provide some background to his works and to explore just how philosophies may be integrated within this kind of writing. In §4, we will at last come to a more in-depth analysis of Camus’ own work, employing this Marcellian framework of *disponibilité* and presence to the texts, before demonstrating Camus’ own innovation within the genre—confessional *indisponibilité* (§5).

1. ***Disponibilité and Presence***

The term *disponibilité* (which may be translated as ‘availability’, or ‘being at the disposal of’) is used by Marcel to refer to the human capacity to be open, exposed and vulnerable before others. We are *disponible* when we are ready and willing to listen to, empathise with and feel for the Other (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 40). Of course, we may be *disponible* without others realising it, if we do not ‘reveal’ ourselves as ‘present’. Marcel explains, ‘there are some people who reveal themselves as ‘present’—that is to say, at our disposal—when we are in pain or need to confide in someone’, continuing, ‘there are other people who do not give us this feeling, however great is their goodwill. […] there is a way of listening which is a way of giving, and another way of listening which is a way of refusing, of refusing oneself (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 40). To reveal oneself as present is to make the Other aware of our *disponibilité*. It is an act of trust but also of compassion—something which asks for reciprocity.

Presence is of course a quality which we sometimes possess, sometimes not, just as is *disponibilité.* An undeniable factor in any kind of ethical decision-making are the problems of relevance and priority. When faced with the suffering of others, we may be distracted by some other pressing issue, consider it ‘none of our business’ or even simply feel a lack of sympathy at the present moment. Marcel describes this feeling of *indisponibilité* as something ‘invariably rooted in some measure of alienation’ (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 40-41). He offers an example,

Say, for instance, that I am told of some misfortune with which I am asked to sympathise: I understand what I am told; I admit in theory that the sufferer deserves my sympathy; I see that it is a case that it would be logical and just for me to respond with sympathy; I even offer my sympathy, but only with my mind; because, when all is said and done, I am obliged to admit that I feel absolutely nothing. (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 40-41)

This is a feeling we can no doubt all relate to; at one time or another we all experience alienation from something we feel perhaps we ‘ought’ to care about—for example, if we walk past a homeless person in winter, or feel nothing upon hearing of someone’s death on the news. This awareness of our temporary inability to empathise in such situations can be uncomfortable. As Marcel puts it, ‘the contradiction between the indifference which I feel in fact and the sympathy which I know I ought to feel is humiliating and annoying; it diminishes me in my own eyes’ (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 40-41). Experiences such as this certainly make us ‘feel bad’ for others, but it is not true compassion, only a sense that we have failed to make good on a moral obligation.

Although a tendency towards *indisponibilité* may appear to reveal some kind of moral flaw, our ability to withdraw ourselves emotionally (to make ourselves *indisponible*) is in many ways necessary for our survival as individual humans: ‘if one had to be touched by every human misfortune life would not be possible, it would indeed be too short’ (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 41). In other words, we sometimes need for our own sake *not to care*. Marcel suggests that this kind of ‘moral sclerosis’ that seems essential for dealing with human life (and the suffering it encompasses) as ‘an increasingly precise and […] automatic division between what concerns him and what does not, between things for which he is responsible and those for which he is not’ (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 41). In the development of this survival mechanism for self-preservation, ‘[e]ach one of us becomes the centre of a sort of mental space arranged in concentric zones of decreasing interest and participation. It is as though each one of us has secreted a kind of shell which gradually hardened and imprisoned him’ (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 41). And so , for better or for worse, we are naturally disposed to feel more for those closest to us, which gradually recedes the further away from us the suffering is situated.

This hierarchical divorce from the Other is not necessarily stable or permanent, however. There are times when we are moved in spite of ourselves, and our compassionate responses may take over from our rationalised alienation. Marcel writes, ‘it can happen to anyone to make an encounter which breaks down this egocentric topography […] from a stranger met by chance, there may come an irresistible appeal which overturns the habitual perspectives […] what had seemed near becomes infinitely remote and what had seemed distant seems to be close’ (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 41-42). According to Marcel, in these fleeting moments of compassion for strangers, we recognise that the distinctions we create (consciously or not) are conditional, and we are overcome with a sense of compassion which extends beyond its previous boundaries: ‘it shows us as in a flash all that is contingent and—yes—artificial in the crystallised pattern of our personal system’ (Marcel, ‘On the Ontological Mystery’ 2002, 41-42). Marcel describes this effect in terms of a chance meeting with a stranger, and of course this example is easy to understand, as the *knowledge* of the suffering of the other is reinforced by supplementary ‘information’—be it as clear as visible signs of pain, or something more subtle such as quavering hesitation in a voice, or a certain look in a person’s eye. What I want to suggest in this article, however, is that this is what happens when we encounter confessional and autobiographical writings. The way in which readers attend to, learn from, and trust in a text ordinarily is augmented and supplemented by the immediacy and intimacy of this form of writing[[3]](#endnote-3). This shatters our position as impervious observers, and we find ourselves *disponible* in the presence of the narrator.

As humans, we all tell stories about ourselves, in order to make sense of the things which befall us and how we develop in response to our experiences. As Paul Ricoeur explains, ‘[i]t is therefore by means of the imaginative variations of our own ego that we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind that escapes the apparent choice between sheer change and identity. Between the two lies narrative identity.’ (Ricoeur 1991, 33)—in other words, narrative thus allows for a changing self that responds to external factors and experiences, while retaining the same identity. When we tell these stories to others, then, we communicate our deepest wishes and fears through narrative, making ourselves present and vulnerable to judgement. In demonstrating ourselves to be vulnerable in this way, the reader/listener is made aware of their position of power, and thereby the trust with which they have been bestowed. It makes sense, therefore, that we engage ethically when we encounter the life-stories of others. As one critic writes, ‘[w]e make sense and communicate about our lives and their attendant hopes and cares through the use of narrative, and we make sense in turn of what we might owe to others by turning to their life-stories […] someone who is *disponible* lends a listening ear to the narrative of the cared-for’ (Chen 2015, 780-788).

With this textual understanding of *disponibilité* in mind, it seems to make perfect sense that Marcel would choose to communicate his own thinking in homodiegetic (first-person narrated) life writing. In his ‘An Essay in Autobiography’, he reveals an emotional vulnerability which allows the reader to understand the life that gave birth to his own philosophical tendencies. He writes, ‘[i]t is clear to me now, as I look back on the difficult years which preceded my initiation to philosophy, that my incessant anxiety was coloured by an obscure sense of the irrevocable and of death’—thus he connects this experience of abstract fear to poignant episodes in his childhood—‘I can explain in no other way the terror which gripped me at night whenever my parents stayed out late at a dinner party or a theatre. (Marcel, ‘An Essay in Autobiography’ 2002, 113). Similarly, ‘A Metaphysical Diary’ demonstrates the genesis of Marcel’s concepts of *disponibilité* and *indisponibilité*, and certain passages of his diary are reproduced almost word for word in ‘On the Ontological Mystery’,such as the extracts on *indisponibilité* discussed above (Marcel, ‘A Metaphysical Diary’ 1965, 77-78). But the passages that lend themselves most to Marcel’s concepts don’t always address them directly; they are performative, poignant confessions which draw on the reader’s attention[[4]](#endnote-4), compelling us to respond with *disponibilité*.

The following entry from the diary gives a personal account of the kind of experience that lead to Marcel’s formulation of *indisponibilité*, and it is worth reading in its entirety to appreciate how this personal confession relates to the genesis of his philosophy:

I promised C— the other day that I would come back to the nursing home where he has been dying for weeks, and see him again. The promise seemed to me, when I made it, to spring from the innermost depths of my being. A promise moved by a wave of pity: he is doomed, he knows it, he knows I know it. Several days have gone by since my visit. The circumstances which dictated my promise are unchanged; I have no room for self-deception about that. I should be able to say —yes, I even dare assert—that he still inspires the same compassion in me. How could I justify a change in the state of my feelings, since nothing has happened since which could have the power to alter them? And yet I must in honesty admit that the pity I *felt* the other day, is today no more than a theoretical pity. I still judge that he is unhappy and that it is right to be sorry for him, but this is judgement I should not have dreamed of formulating the other day. There was no need. My whole being was concentrated in an irresistible impulse towards him, a wild longing to help him, to show him that I was on his side, that his sufferings were mine. I have to recognise that this impulse no longer exists, and it is no longer in my power to do more than imitate it by a pretence […] I must accept this fact with shame and sorrow. (Marcel, ‘A Metaphysical Diary’ 1965, 54-55)

The anguish that Marcel feels at the fluctuations in his own *disponibilité* comes across in this passage more clearly than his formal essay on the concept, and the reader feels sympathy and understanding for his pain, recognising our own moral imperfections (in this case a failure of compassion) as kindred to his own. This empathy—in itself a morally valuable thing—comes from our engagement with this confessional text. Having formulated my account of textual *disponibilité*, let us now turn to some classic examples of philosophical life writing, in order to see how this intersubjective textual style brings both the author (and their philosophy) to life.

1. ***The Truth of the Self: from Hippo Regius to Paris***

Naturally, when it comes to assessing the *philosophical* value of life writing, it is impossible to ignore what Martin Warner refers to as ‘the problem of truth’ (Warner 2016, 96). If the stories we tell are intended to reinforce our reasoning or self-understanding in some way, then it seems important that we establish whether these stories are true. But no doubt to some degree we are all capable of self-deception, so it may be an impossible task to write an *entirely truthful* autobiography, even if we intend to. There will also always be a discrepancy between the things we know of ourselves, and whether they are verifiable by outside sources. Autobiographical life writing may of course attempt to bridge this gap between what we know of our inner lives (our subjective knowledge) and how we appear to others (our objective appearances). Genevieve Lloyd describes this endeavour: ‘[a]utobiography purports to present the truth of a self as grasped by itself. It tries to present the self as an object grasped from its own perspective, thus achieving a coincidence between subjective and objective in the putative unity of the narrator and the protagonist.’ (Lloyd 1986, 170). The impressions we have about our life-stories might therefore be more illuminating than any grander notions of objective truth, as they explain the very personal things that persuade and motivate us from the inside, things which no outside source could attest to the truth of.

Accordingly, what I suggest is that it is in fact more interesting (for the purposes of this article) to evaluate philosophical life writing warts and all—that is to say, untruths as well as truths. When it comes to the self, our inner feelings (and even our misconceptions about ourselves) are as much a part of our subjective experience as anything that might be said about us from the outside. In autobiography, the ways in which we deceive ourselves are just as (if not more) telling then verifiable anecdotes. I suggest that this approach makes the ‘problem of truth’ less of a problem. Lloyd remarks, ‘[t]hrough its own creative act, the self is constituted as an object, accessible to the perception of others’ (Lloyd 1986, 170)—it is not that the self is entirely fictitious, rather that the self *as a perceptible object* is brought into being for the first time through the act of being described. In line with Lloyd, I will attempt to give these fictions of the self the ‘special status’ they are neglected if we take the ‘problem of truth’ too seriously. It is for this reason, then, I shall be taking into account not only autobiographical writings, but also fictionalised autobiography and confessions; from this vantage point I suggest that our readings become more *disponible*.

Now, certainly some philosophical life writings do make connections with real-life events as the basis for reasoning. St Augustine, born in Hippo Regius (modern-day Annaba in Algeria), is considered by many to be the father of philosophical life writing; he tells anecdotes of his life, but they are all recited with the intention of illustrating his spiritual and philosophical journey: his *Confessions* depict a ‘a pilgrimage of the soul’ (Hanson-Smith 1978, 176). Indeed, he intends for us to evaluate his experiences as food for philosophical thought, as Warner suggests, Augustine ‘presents us with a model of a human person integrated with the author’s perception of his or her own self in the light of past experience. This integration provides a point of reference for understanding that experience’ (Warner 2016, 118); in other words, for Augustine, self-knowledge and exploration is key to philosophical insight, and our experiences as subjects can be used in our very reasoning itself. Prior to writing the *Confessions*, Augustine wrote a lengthy philosophical treatise outlining the very same territory as the later autobiographical work, entitled *De quantitate*. But this text, philosophically interesting as it may be, fails to represent Augustine’s struggle as a subject, and thus it is impossible for the reader to attend to it in the same manner. The *Confessions*, on the other hand,give us a much more poignant understanding of the subject communicating with us; Augustine becomes present to us, and we are *disponible* to him, rather than simply engaging with his philosophy. We are also given concrete examples (from his life) for the philosophical content of the text, making his suggestions still more persuasive (a pattern which will now be familiar when we consider Camus’ use of philosophical life writing).

Augustine wrote his confessions in order for his readers to be able to engage with his spiritual journey, but that was not his endgame. He also believed that his confessions could be the key to readers understanding themselves, as his philosophical subject matter is the development of the spiritual self—‘[t]he rationale of ‘confessing’ is not really, he insists, to make himself known to others; but rather to make it possible for them to know themselves’ (Lloyd 1986, 173). The eighteenth-century critic of Enlightenment values, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wrote his own *Confessions* with a different goal in mind.Whilst (like Augustine’s) they do illustrate his philosophical thinking, Rousseau’s *Confessions* are more like an attempt to set the record straight[[5]](#endnote-5). As Starobinski put it, ‘[t]he *Confessions* is in the first place an attempt to rectify an error made by other people […] Rousseau’s concerns start with this question […] Why is it so difficult to bring about a concord between what one is for oneself and what one is for others?’ (Starobinski 1971, 32) (trans. (Williams 2002, 175)). Rousseau is concerned with the discrepancy between inner feelings and the impressions we give others, he is desperate to be understood, and to reconcile object and subject. Because of this desire, he is keenly aware of the problem of truth (as was discussed at the beginning of this section). To waylay those who might dispute his stories, Rousseau appeals to the truth of his emotions and feelings—something which he claims cannot be contested. He tells us,

I may omit or transpose facts, or make mistakes in dates; but I cannot go wrong about what I have felt, or about what my feelings have led me to do; and these are the chief subjects of my story. The true object of my confessions is to reveal my inner thoughts exactly in all the situations of my life. It is the history of my soul that I have promised to recount, and to write it faithfully I have need of no other memories; it is enough if I enter again into my inner self. (Rousseau 1953, 262)

Rousseau is clearly conscious of the unreliability of self-narration, but promises the reader an honest account of his inner life. While we cannot be sure that his memory of past feelings serves him well, he implores the reader to accept his sincerity in the moment of confessing. Given the fact that all confessions are retrospective, this problem unfortunately cannot be eliminated, so the reader must accept the fallibility of the narrator.

Thus we are left with a flawed account of the life of a flawed man, but one that we can come to relate to. From this vulnerable position, Rousseau invites his readers to reflect on their own imperfection: ‘Let them groan at my depravities, and blush for my misdeeds. But let each one of them reveal his heart at the foot of Thy throne with equal sincerity, and may any man who dares, say ‘I was a better man than he’’ (Rousseau 1953, 17). Responding to Rousseau’s own project of self-revelation, the reader is invited to look inside herself and acknowledge her flaws. The honesty we are encouraged to give our own selves enables us to be more *disponible* in our readings. Having endeavoured to apply this concept of *disponibilité* to the classic philosophical autobiographies, let us now turn to the main focus of the essay – the ethical project of Camus’ own life writings, both factual and fictional.

1. ***Disponibilité and Camus***

Confessional writing such as that of Rousseau and Augustine undoubtedly had a profound effect on literary form. No longer were protagonists expected to be virtuous or brave, they were excepted instead to be flawed, genuine subjects. Certain authors in the French tradition particularly demonstrate this, such as André Gide and Victor Hugo, both of whom wrote provocative and poignant confessional works of fiction. The similarity is not purely technical, however, as their life writings also encompass a philosophical or moral endeavour. *The Last Day of a Condemned Man (Hugo 2009)*, as one might expect, documents the final hours of a man sentenced to death. Just what crime this man has committed is left to the reader’s imagination, and instead we are given a powerful account of the profound suffering and psychological turmoil faced by a person in this situation. In encountering this horrific experience from the perspective of the narrator, the reader cannot help but empathise with this man, whatever it is he might have done. *The Immoralist (Gide 1970)*, on the other hand,is an intriguing meditation on morality in the face of death. The tuberculotic protagonist Michel is forced to face his mortality, and the curious light these experiences cast on his world throws his sense of moral certainty into question. The lineage between these confessional authors and Albert Camus is no doubt already somewhat clear, particularly with regard to the two texts mentioned. Both *The Outsider* and *Reflections on the Guillotine* draw heavily on *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, and Gide’s *The Immoralist* certainly influenced Camus—it even reads like a more nihilistic early Camus novel, with a protagonist who embraces the absurd more consciously than Meursault, the (anti)hero of *The Outsider*. The current section will therefore refine our analysis of the link between *disponibilité* and the confessional elements of Camus writings (chronologically, according to the dates they were written, rather than published), whilst making links to those confessional works previously discussed. My analysis of *The Fall* will not be introduced until the following section, as the complexity of this venture requires a more detailed examination still.

As was claimed in the introduction to this article, just about all of Camus’ creative works use elements of either confessional writing or philosophical autobiography. The majority of Camus’ novels (indeed all of those that were published whilst he was still alive) are written as confessions or memoirs, or from a first-person perspective. One notable exception from this trend is Camus’ first novel which remained unpublished until after his death, entitled *A Happy Death*. This novel is told from a 3rd person perspective, featuring Patrice Mersault, a character loosely based on Camus’ own youth, supplemented by a number of fictional events (such as the murder he commits at the beginning of the story) (A. Camus, A Happy Death 2002, 5). Elements of this work are of course reused in *The Outsider*,but the interesting narrative transition between the two novels (Meursault’s story being told homodiegetically, Mersault’s heterodiegetically) is indicative of something more than stylistic. I suggest that this narrative shift actually represents something philosophical—an authorial striving for *disponibilité*. Never entirely satisfied with his first attempt at a novel, Camus reworked the character of ‘Mersault’ into the character ‘Meursault’ for *The Outsider*. There are a number of differences between these two characters, but most notable is that Meursault no longer resembles the young Camus—instead he is the embodiment of a philosophical concept, the absurd.

Just as the philosophical work done in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is represented in *The Outsider*, *The Rebel* can be seen as the philosophical skeleton of *The Plague*. *The Plague*, as with the other novels, draws on the method of confession and life writing, as it is narrated using both an eye-witness account (Rieux’s) and philosophical diary (Tarrou’s). The identity of the narrator of this novel is withheld until towards the end of the novel, which encourages the reader to take the account as unbiased—we follow Rieux’s struggles and suffering without realising it is his own account. Instead, we see Rieux as an agent of ‘revolt’, a concept which Camus expounds in *The Rebel.* By ‘revolt’, Camus refers to a moment of inner rebellion, which stems from the human recognition of the injustice of suffering. In this instant, as the human rails against their own mistreatment, according to Camus, this is when we begin to feel a sense of solidarity for others; he wrote, ‘when he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and, from his point of view, human solidarity is metaphysical’ (A. Camus, The Rebel 2000, 22-23). The act of rebellion affirms the value of human life, it represents human ‘unity against the suffering of life and death’ (A. Camus, The Rebel 2000, 30), and for Camus, only a sense of human suffering can found a morality, we must open ourselves up to a ‘collective unhappiness’ (A. Camus, The Rebel 2000, 28) to make ethical progress. In *The Plague*, this revolt isnot portrayed heroically, but in the everyday struggles of Rieux and Tarrou as they try to contain the spread of the sickness. As readers of the novel, we are engrossed in their day to day efforts as ordinary human beings—people who it is far easier to relate to, rather than aggrandise, given the intimate mode of narration with which their story is told.

*The First Man* is Camus’ final novel, unfinished at the time of his death, and as such it is impossible to guess how the author would have edited the finished piece. Nevertheless, it is still pertinent to the current discussion because, just like all his other novels, *The First Man* can be included in the genre of philosophical life writing. In this novel, Camus returns to the heterodiegetic method of fictionalised autobiography as used in *A Happy Death*, only this time it is barely fictionalised at all, only fleshed out with literary detail. Just about every fact of the protagonist Jacques Cormery’s life is shared with the author himself, such as the death of his father at the Battle of Marne in WWI, his childhood in the poverty of Belcourt, and the scholarship thanks to which he was able to pursue his education (Todd 1996). Camus’ daughter, Catherine, wrote in the introduction to the English edition, ‘one can most clearly hear my father’s voice in this text because of its very rawness’ (C. Camus 2013, vii). This novel is of course written after all of Camus’ published philosophical works, and thus the novel is a lucid account of the life that gave birth to Camus’ philosophy. Both the ideas and the man behind them are now fully formed and philosophically cogent, unlike in his naïve early novel. *A Happy Death* is full of youthful vigour, uncertainty and idealism, whereas *The First Man*, much more like Rousseau’s and Augustine’s confessions, is able to reflect on a spiritual and philosophical journey, making the author present and the reader *disponible* to the story of the subject and the ideas the story has inspired.

1. ***Penitence and Betrayal***

Formally, *The Fall* is really quite different from Camus’ other philosophical life writings; it consists of a series of long, rambling monologues by a stranger in a bar in Amsterdam, who addresses the reader as ‘you’ and proceeds to divulge his sins and misdeeds (which are of course many and various). In his sinful revelations, Jean-Baptiste Clamence is reminiscent in some ways of the unnamed narrator of *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky 2009), but he is entirely more charismatic. Certainly, Clamence divulges his misdeeds to us, but even in his confession he is manipulating his reader; the experience of reading *The Fall* is somewhat like being gaslighted. Clamence, a self-appointed ‘judge-penitent’ is a captivating narrator—he is witty, conspiratorial and domineering—even the activity of reading the novel gives the reader a feeling of submission to a stronger will. The narrator addresses us directly, putting words in our mouths, (‘You must be in business? More or less? Excellent reply.’ (A. Camus, The Fall 2006, 6)), and responding to questions we are not sure we have asked (‘I do appreciate your curiosity. Yet there’s nothing extraordinary about my story. I’ll tell you, since you want to know’ (A. Camus, The Fall 2006, 27)). This effect is a powerful one—the reader is swept along effortlessly, and beguiled into commiserating with this supposedly frank and unflinching confession.

Whilst being in many ways more what we might call a meta-confessional than an actual one (as it is a predominantly fictional confessional written about the act of confessing), there are elements of *The Fall* which betray Camus’ own feelings of guilt; indeed, Camus’ sometime friend Sartre said that his favourite of Camus’ works was *The Fall*, because according to him, Camus both revealed himself and hid himself in it (Todd 1996, 638). Camus famously had complicated and often problematic relationships with women. After his failed marriage to his first wife, Simone Hie (a prescription drug-addict who was having an affair with the doctor who wrote her prescriptions (Todd 1996, 116)), he seems to have become very sceptical of marriage and monogamy. This is embodied in his account of ‘Don-Juanism’ in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he claimed (somewhat illogically), ‘[i]t is indeed because he [Don Juan] loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest’, asking ‘[w]hy should it be essential to love rarely in order to love much?' (A. Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus 2005, 67). Despite professing such ideas (and indeed practicing them to some extent), Camus was devoted to one woman above all others, María Casarès, with whom (ironically) he was in an extra-marital relationship for sixteen years, until his death (Todd 1996, 349, 752). Camus’ second wife, Francine (whom he was married to at the time), struggled so much with his unfaithfulness that she attempted suicide by throwing herself from a window—a fall which so haunted Camus that it is rumoured to be the inspiration for *The Fall*, specifically the central motif of a woman who jumps off the Pont Royal in Paris, and Clamence’s memory of his subsequent paralysed inaction haunts him (A. Camus, The Fall 2006, 43-44). Camus’ own disquiet with his treatment of women is confessed through Clamence, he tells us, ‘I have always thought misogyny to be both vulgar and stupid, and considered almost all the women I have known to be better than myself. However, while setting them so high, I exploited rather than served them. What does that mean?’ (A. Camus, The Fall 2006, 36). Camus cryptically communicates his own remorse with regard to Francine through the mouthpiece of Clamence, and in this sense, *The Fall* fills the traditional role of a confessional: Camus wants to be absolved of his sins by a *disponible* reader. That Camus nevertheless chooses to disguise his feelings of guilt under the veil of fiction is telling—not able to confess honestly though his own voice, he cannot hope to be truly understood, and thereby excused for his actions. Instead, the fictional confession provides the kind of anonymity of a real-life confessional box, excluding the judgement of all others but the reader, who fills the role of the priest. In this intimate space, we do not have to condone his wrongdoings, but we can forgive him.

What is most interesting about *The Fall*, however, is what most sets it apart from Camus’ other ventures into philosophical life writing. Clamence, like Rousseau, claims to have been misunderstood. They want to set the record straight, but in opposite directions—for the most part, Rousseau wants to reveal his virtue, but with Clamence, it’s his vice. In reference to Rousseau, Bernard Williams writes, ‘[w]hat someone says, after all, may sincerely express malign and uncooperative self-interest. Of course, it is not so common that people will express this, since the malignly uncooperative have good reason not to display their motives’ (Williams 2002, 179), and while this would ordinarily be true, this assumption is false in Clamence’s case. In disclosing his ‘malign and uncooperative self-interest’ so freely, we accept his repentance as sincere, oblivious to any secondary motives he might have. Williams goes on to suggest that ‘a person who is disposed to [… moral] weakness is no more reliable than someone who is malicious, and in some ways less so’ (Williams 2002, 180). Clamence wants us to believe that his account is reliable, precisely because he is so frank about his malice and self-interest. But can we really trust him? After he has spent the entire novel divulging his darkest secrets, making the reader his confidant, he tells us, ‘I have accepted duplicity […] I’ve settled in it’ (A. Camus, The Fall 2006, 88), making the reader well aware in the end that he has manipulated us. Clamence lies *to us* and not just *to himself*, as we might say of other philosophical auto-biographers. He explains what he sees to be the real purpose of confession: to deceive; ‘I only like confessions nowadays, and the authors of confessions write chiefly in order not to confess, saying nothing of what they know. When they pretend to be owning up, that’s the moment to beware: they’re putting make-up on the corpse. Believe me, I’m a craftsman.’ (A. Camus, The Fall 2006, 76).

And so, having lent ourselves to the intimate act of hearing a confession, we find out our *disponibilité* was poorly placed. He tells us,

The main thing is to be able to let oneself do anything, while from time to time loudly declaring one’s unworthiness […] I haven’t changed my way of life: I still love myself and I still use other people. It’s just that confessing my sins permits me to start again with a lighter heart and to gratify myself twice, firstly enjoying my nature, and then a delicious repentance (A. Camus, The Fall 2006, 88-89)

Clamence uses his affected candour to deceive his interlocutor until the very end of the book, when he reveals that he confesses only as a means to sinning again, which he will do with redoubled enthusiasm, successfully having made his suffering someone else’s. The reader is won over only to have her trust betrayed, her poorly placed *disponibilité* thrown in her face. Clamence is able to draw us in to this manipulation because of the immediacy of the confessional genre, he is able to feign presence, gaining our sympathy in order to abuse it. Through Clamence, Camus demonstrates the complexity of the confessional venture: forgiveness by the Other does not always mean redemption, unless we can forgive ourselves, and hope to change. Clamence airs Camus’ own guilt, whilst reminding us that *indisponibilité* is a double-edged sword.

1. ***Conclusion***

As Sartre suggested of his own autobiography, all in the world of life writing is ‘false, true, neither true nor false, like all that is written about madmen or about men’ (Sartre 1967, 45-46). Allowing for such untruths as a necessary part of self-narration, I have assessed the effects of confessional writing as a philosophical and literary technique, as used by Albert Camus throughout his creative works, situated with the wider context of philosophical life writing. At the heart of all Camus’ writings (both philosophical and literary), lies an ethical endeavour: to elicit an empathetic awareness of the Other by narrative means. That is to say, that for Camus, the openness we experience in encountering a narrative text is of moral significance, as it encourages to reflect on the suffering and inner lives of others in a way that otherwise might not be possible, and from this activity we may improve our moral acuity. Nowhere in Camus’ writings does this venture come across more readily than in the works discussed in this article, as he utilises confessional techniques to evoke *disponibilité* in the reader to maximal effect. Camus uses the genre of philosophical life writing is as a means of bringing about an intersubjective experience of the Other, and the unmediated and vulnerable communication that follows acts in place of the direct, second-person communication we experience in the real world. The reader is thus situated in a phenomenological space where their empathetic and emotional responses are fully engaged, as if in intimate conversation.

As we have seen, Camus uses of confessional writing vary dramatically, too. *The First Man* was called Camus’ ‘most nakedly autobiographical novel’ by Catherine Camus, but as the novel was left unfinished at the time of Camus’ death, it is impossible to tell whether the frankness and vulnerability present in the manuscript would have been toned down before publication. What we are left with, however, is a poignant portrait of a life that gave birth to a philosophy; *The First Man* transforms Camus’ own philosophical journey into a *bildungsroman*, and the protagonist tangibly present, and the reader *disponible*.The use of confessional writing in *The Fall*, however, is very different. In this novel, Camus makes his readers conscious of their trust, not just by invoking it, but also by its abuse. The role of the unreliable narrator has been examined *ad infinitum* in literary criticism, but Jean-Baptiste Clamence is more than that; he is an unreliable interlocutor, and his betrayal is therefore far more personal. While *The Fall* voices some of Camus’ own sense of guilt, it is also a performative demonstration of the complexity of the confessional project, and thus there is a dynamic movement of *disponibilité* that the reader experiences in encountering this novel – from judgement to curiosity, from trust to betrayal, and finally to self-reflection.

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1. By philosophical life writing, I mean to refer to any biographical writing which deals *substantially* with philosophical ideas (assuming that all biographical writing approaches philosophy to a minor extent, it after all being a reflection of human life). It should also be noted that the ‘fictionality’ of any piece of life writing is necessarily a matter of degree—from minor self-deceptions in autobiographies, all the way to entirely imagined literary life stories, most biographies will no doubt contain some fictional elements. For this reason, when I refer to ‘fictional life writing’, I only mean to include life writings which the author *intends* to be read as fiction. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In *Homo Viator*, Marcel explicitly critiques Camus on the grounds that he (according to Marcel) celebrates absurdity, nihilism and meaninglessness (Marcel 1945, 195-8), based on his discussion of absurdity in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus never responded to these criticisms in any detail, but as I will suggest in this article and elsewhere, these accusations of nihilism are unfounded, as Camus argues for meaning *despite* the absurdity of our condition. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The specific features of confessional writing which bring about his effect will be looked at in more detail throughout the remainder of the article. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This idea of attending to a person or character in a text is not dissimilar to Iris Murdoch’s conception of ‘attention’ (Murdoch, ‘The Idea of Perfection’ 2001, 22), but unfortunately it is not within the scope of the current article to do justice to an analysis of Murdoch’s theory. For further reading, see Iris Murdoch, 2001, “The Idea of Perfection,” in *The Sovereignty of Good*. Oxford: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Curiously enough, Rousseau mentions Augustine only once in his *Confessions*, and even then it is only in passing, failing to give credit to Augustine’s work which no doubt inspired his own. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)