**‘What-it’s-like’ for The Other:**

**Narrative Knowledge and Faith in *The Meursault Investigation***

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism;Kamel Daoud; Albert Camus; Narrative; The Other; Algeria.

***Abstract***

In this article I argue that Kamel Daoud’s novel, *Meursault, Contre-Enquête*, demonstrates the power of narrative praxis when it comes to constructing and comprehending our notions of the self and other. This novel is in many ways a response to Albert Camus’ *The Outsider*, as it is situated in the fictional world of Camus’ own novel, and it holds Meursault, and French-Algeria more generally, accountable for their actions. Whilst Daoud’s postcolonial critique of *The Outsider* is an important element of the novel, I suggest that there is an ethical venture at play here which has yet to be given credit: Daoud’s novel investigates the ambiguous position of those that dwell on the borders between cultures, thereby demonstrating the necessity of learning to empathise with those we might otherwise consider our enemy.

1. ***Introduction***

Since publication, Algerian journalist Kamel Daoud’s debut novel, *The Meursault Investigation*,*[[1]](#footnote-1)* has received considerable attention among Camus scholars and general readers alike. The novel revisits some of Albert Camus’ most famous works, but from the perspective of post-Independence Algeria, providing the reader with a rich allegorical account of Algerian identity, politics and history, and the duality therein, as well as (as I will argue in this article) an exploration of the role of literature in cultural understanding. The innovation and depth of *The Meursault Investigation* is thus worthy of comparison to other *tours de force* of postcolonial rewriting such as Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea[[2]](#footnote-2)* and J M Coetzee’s *Foe*,[[3]](#footnote-3) as well as ethical metafictions such as Ian McEwan’s *Atonement[[4]](#footnote-4).* The text itself is in part a pastiche of Camus’ œuvre, recycling his storylines, motifs, philosophical ideas, and even whole passages from the original texts, which has led the novel to be interpreted in many ways—as an homage, as a critique, even as plagiarism—but as I hope to show in this article, *The Meursault Investigation* is so much more than that. The majority of commentators on Daoud’s novel have understandably tended to focus on the postcolonial side of the novel,[[5]](#footnote-5) because, as one critic writes, *The Meursault Investigation* ‘exposes what might be called the colonial unconscious of the original’s representational strategies’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Upon the release of the English translation, a review by *Guardian* journalist, Nick Fraser, implied that the novel reveals an underlying ‘white racism’ which informs *The Outsider*; on account of Camus’ failure to give ‘the Arab’ a name[[7]](#footnote-7)—I contend that this analysis hardly does justice to either text. Another reviewer, writing in *The* *Tablet* magazine, takes the more nuanced position that the ‘power of *The Meursault Investigation* comes from the way it reinstates precisely what Camus omits from *The Outsider:* not simply the name of ‘the Arab’, or a political agenda, but a morality based on empathy’.[[8]](#footnote-8) My focus in this article is *how* this novel ‘reinstates’ such a morality. In its creation of a dialogue between oppressed and oppressor, I suggest that *The Meursault Investigation* demonstrates the ability of narrative praxis to facilitate a reader’s comprehension and reconstruction of both the self and other.[[9]](#footnote-9) The novel is *not only* the story of a man learning to understand his supposed enemy through engagement with his writing, it is also the story of a man learning to understand himself through the activity of reading. As such, I contend that the insights generated by engagement with this postcolonial text have important ethical implications which could be applied to the role of literary narratives more generally. More specifically, I suggest that the role of Meursault in *The Meursault Investigation* is one that re-instils a non-religious faith in Harun, the novel’s protagonist—one that he has lost through his postcolonial encounter with Algeria.

With a view to the aims aforementioned, the following section will make salient some key features of both *The Outsider* and *The Meursault Investigation*, illustrating their relationship to my argument. In the third section, I will then attempt to construct a philosophical framework for understanding the kind of knowledge that Harun attains, by borrowing both from Eleonore Stump’s work in philosophy of religion,[[10]](#footnote-10) and Frank Jackson’s epistemic theory.[[11]](#footnote-11) In section 4, I go on to use this framework as a tool for analysing not only Daoud’s novel, but also for making reference to Camus’ work. While Eleonore Stump draws her epistemic theory from Christian theology, I suggest that her conception of Franciscan knowledge has useful implications beyond these borders, as it hits on something important—the power of narrative to communicate alternative perspectives on the world. This secularisation of Franciscan knowledge is also reflected in the novel’s exploration of faith and redemption. Guilt is central to the activity of *The Meursault Investigation*—not only Meursault’s guilt, but also (as we will come to see) Harun’s. In the fifth section, therefore, I suggest that, just as faith is often derived from the kind of religious stories upon which Stump bases her conception of Franciscan knowledge, Harun is able to nurture a kind of faith through his engagement with Meursault’s narrative. This faith is a non-religious faith in the other, one that enables him to feel redeemed from his own guilt, transcending the ethical judgements he imposes on himself via post-Independence Algerian norms. This is a post-religious, post-colonial faith that enriches his experience of his homeland, reconciling him to his own otherness.

1. ***From Meursault to Harun***

*The Outsider* by Albert Camus is one of the most written about novels of the 20th century[[12]](#footnote-12)—and rightly so. This text not only approaches some of the most important philosophical themes (including mortality, justice, and ideology) but it is also tremendously readable, at just over a hundred pages long and in a simple and engaging first-person narrative. These qualities alone have secured it a place on reading lists for philosophy and literature since its publication, but more recent studies have focussed less on the content of the novel than what it fails to say.[[13]](#footnote-13) To understand what this means it will help to offer a brief summary of the plot. Our protagonist, Meursault, is a young man living alone and working in an unstimulating job in French Algeria. He seems to apathetically take everything in his stride (including personal relationships, and even the death of his mother), until one day he becomes involved in a quarrel between a rather dubious friend of his and a group of young Arabic-Algerian men. The turning point of the novel is the moment when Meursault finds himself in front of these men with a gun in his hand on a scorching beach. The incredible heat of the sun crashing onto the sand is too much for Meursault, and he loses control, killing one of the men. The second half of the novel catalogues the events that follow this spilling of blood—that is, Meursault’s imprisonment, trial and his awaiting the death sentence. Throughout these momentous events, the reader is privy to the thoughts of Meursault, with reflections that are philosophically very interesting—through the mind of Meursault the reader is brought to reflect on mortality, the absurd and even ideology.[[14]](#footnote-14) But the narrative is painfully one-sided: the man that Meursault killed is referred to throughout simply as ‘the Arab’, and consequently *this* other is not engaged with at all—his story and person are completely absent from the novel. This is where Daoud steps in, albeit almost 70 years later.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*The Meursault Investigation* is written from the perspective of the brother of the dead ‘Arab’, and at last he is given a name—Musa. Musa’s brother, Harun, tells us the other side of the story, giving us another view of the world that Meursault inhabited. Harun’s life is scarred by the death of his older brother, and though the murder appears in the newspapers, only the murderer is named, not the victim. Consequently, Musa’s poor, illiterate family are alienated from the crime—they simply never see him again, and Harun is left to obsess about this mysterious killer. One idiosyncrasy of *The Meursault Investigation* that is important to note is that Camus’ book *The Outsider* exists within the world of the novel, appearing as a first-person account of Meursault’s crime and trial, written by Meursault himself. This text is referred to using an alternative, yet very apt title, ‘The Other’,[[16]](#footnote-16) while the real-life author, Camus, has simply ceased to exist. The presence of the ‘The Other’ in the world of the novel highlights an issue which is in fact central to this article—that is, the role that narrative plays in coming to understand the Other. By giving Meursault the role of ‘author’ of *The Outsider*, his actions are treated with the moral seriousness they deserve. We are also given an extraordinarily acute illustration of how a novel’s narrative can act as a window into the mind of the Other, through which we can perceive truths otherwise inaccessible.

To return to the plot of *The Meursault Investigation*, our protagonist, Harun, grows up bereft by the loss of his brother, and indeed their mother never ceases to mourn Musa. It is a long time, however, before Harun is even aware that there is a book written by his brother’s murderer about the event of Musa’s death; when he discovers this, naturally it is a revelation. When he finally reads *The Outsider/*‘The Other’ what is most striking to him is the complete absence of his brother from the book. Yes, Meursault kills an ‘Arab’; yes, spilling Musa’s blood on Algerian sand changes Meursault’s life irrevocably; yes, committing murder brings about some intense philosophical reflection on life, death, and guilt; but not in the way anyone possessing an ounce of compassion for the victim would expect. Musa is only ever referred to as ‘the Arab’, and Meursault’s philosophical reflections are brought on by his own imminent death, not the fact he has taken another life. As Harun tells us,

Musa’s body will remain a mystery. There’s not a word in the book about it. That’s denial of a shockingly violent kind, don’t you think? As soon as the shot is fired, the murderer turns around, heading for a mystery he considers worthier of interest than the Arab’s life[[17]](#footnote-17)

Musa’s identity was erased not by death, but by the insignificance entailed in his status as ‘Arab’ in a colonised country. Nevertheless, this mystery has tormented and fascinated Harun since childhood, and, as we will come to see, there is more to the relationship between Harun and Meursault than immediately meets the eye. As Daoud himself said of it in a recent interview:

it’s the same relationship as the decolonised have with the colonisers: a relationship full of fascination and anger; a relationship of resemblance and rejection […] this link between Harun and Meursault very much resembles the link that we have in relation to a time, to a coloniser […] to a culture… and to ourselves.[[18]](#footnote-18)

And so, the role of ‘The Other’as a novel—as a narrative—in this relationship, is central and indispensable, working not only on an individual level (i.e. between the inner lives of Meursault and Harun), but also on a wider, cultural level, as the novel gives insights into the world of the oppressed Other, as well as creating a dialogue with historical oppressors. Thus, we return to the task of this article: to attempt to analyse the movements and implications of Daoud’s novel, the dialogue it creates between these characters, and between the inseparable and irreconcilable elements of postcolonial identity. The following section will therefore set up a philosophical framework for the task in hand.

1. ***Franciscan Knowledge and ‘What-it’s-like-ness’***

*Wandering in Darkness*, a recent volume on the problem of suffering by leading figure in philosophy of religion, Eleonore Stump, encompasses an insightful positing of the place of narrative within epistemology. In this influential text, Stump argues for the possibility of gaining knowledge of the Other through narrative engagement. She sets out her conception of two different forms or systems of knowledge, which she labels Franciscan and Dominican. Basing her categorisation on the traditions surrounding Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, she explains, ‘[i]f argument is the coin of the realm for Dominicans, stories fill an analogous role for Franciscans.’[[19]](#footnote-19)[[20]](#footnote-20) She continues, ‘The Dominican system is helpful for making clear distinctions focused on details, about which argument is possible and often frequent’.[[21]](#footnote-21) This is the kind of knowledge she attributes as the goal of the analytic tradition of philosophy—the kind that can be derived from arguments based on truth claims. On the other hand, narrative and storytelling are central to the Franciscan tradition, and therefore the kind of understanding that can be gained via these means is what she labels ‘Franciscan’[[22]](#footnote-22).

My reading of *The Meursault Investigation* posits Harun’s reading of ‘The Other’as ‘Franciscan’ within Stump’s schema;[[23]](#footnote-23) this is due to the important knowledge and insight that Harun is able to obtain about Meursault(and indeed French Algeria) from reading his text, and the empathy identified by Kirsch as quoted above. For example, there are all kind of facts that could be communicated about Meursault via the Dominican system—such as that he is French-Algerian, that he killed someone, or that he is imprisoned. In philosophical terms, we could use these facts as premises, and by means of weighing up their logical implications, infer further knowledge from these facts. What Dominican knowledge cannot account for, however, is the perspective we gain from encountering his narrative, the subtle moments of understanding and resistance we experience in confronting his story, or the sense we get of Meursault as a person. This is the stuff that cannot be reduced to propositional content (knowledge *that*), or even rigorous argumentation—this is what we mean by Franciscan knowledge.

Stump tells us, ‘The author's presentation of the character, if it is well done, makes that character available to us in somewhat the same way the character would have been if he had in fact been directly and immediately present to us.’[[24]](#footnote-24) Stump of course does not mean ‘present’ in the physical sense, but as though the character’s *personhood* is actually perceptible to us (something which physical presence of course does not necessarily entail). She refers to this effect as a ‘second person experience’[[25]](#footnote-25)—alike to the experience of being addressed as ‘you’. This, I suggest, is how Harun learns from Meursault, and how we in turn learn from both of them: the activity of reading elicits a conscious and sensitive engagement with their narratives, and we treat them as a people, learning to empathise with their actions and motives: something which is often difficult when we encounter otherness in real life. Through this experience of the other through narrative, we are able to gain a kind of intersubjective knowledge; in the presence of the Other, via the text, we are brought to reflect upon our own person, actions and cultural assumptions.

Following Eleonore Stump,[[26]](#footnote-26) and by way of further illustrating this point, I will reformulate this claim based on a famous thought-experiment by the analytic philosopher, Frank Jackson.[[27]](#footnote-27) The traditional line of argument goes something like this: Mary is a gifted neuroscientist who knows all there is to know about what happens on a neurological level when a human sees colours. But what is unusual about Mary is that she has spent her entire life living in a black and white room, learning from a black and white screen: Mary has no sense data (or *qualia*) of colours to which she can apply her theoretical knowledge. One day, Mary leaves the room and for the first time she sees a red rose. Jackson suggests that, despite her extensive knowledge of the scientific processes of perceiving colours, upon seeing this rose Mary gains new information about what it is to see the colour red from the experience. This information is phenomenological; it is the ‘what-it’s-like-ness’ of seeing the colour red, equal to Franciscan knowledge.

There are two directions in which Jackson’s thought experiment may be applied to my argument. The first is to recognise that Meursault (and indeed readers of *The Outsider*, and perhaps even Camus himself)is in many ways akin to Mary. Whilst he has a certain amount of knowledge *that*, pertaining to Arabic-Algerians and their culture, he is alienated from them to such a degree that they do not feature as subjects in his worldview, even after he has murdered one. For many readers, the experience of encountering *The Meursault Investigation* is something like what Mary experiences when she finally leaves her black and white room and sees that red rose—for the first time it is possible to appreciate ‘what-it’s-like’ for the ‘Arab’, on both a personal and a cultural level.[[28]](#footnote-28) The second move to make is to see Harun as being kindred to Mary. The War of Independence made every effort to erase French culture from Algeria, and growing up in an environment which so strongly denied this important period of Algerian history (and the alternative account of French-Algerian people), is equivalent to the black and white room. When Harun discovers ‘The Other’, he discovers the possibility of a different way of seeing—he discovers ‘what-it’s-like’ for Meursault, and for French-Algerians in general. For us, the readers of both these novels, we are given the opportunity to gain new, Franciscan knowledge from both of these accounts (what-it’s-like for both sides of postcolonial Algeria), and this experience is what promotes faith in the Other.

While Harun is reading ‘The Other’ as a kind of memoir, relating events that really happened, we read both novels as fiction. Putting discussions of knowledge and the ‘truth’ of fiction, and the fictive nature of autobiography to one side, the real project of *The Meursault Investigation* is the creation of a dialogue between two alienated perspectives on the same precious homeland, and the sense that this dialogue helps make of the fractured identities of both sides. While we read *The Outsider* as fiction and Harun reads ‘The Other’ as factual, both Meursault’s story and Harun’s are partial and incomplete: they can both be seen as unreliable narrators. By making the text itself of *The Outsider* a part of Harun’s fictional world, Daoud is enabled to call into question the veracity of Meursault’s account (as he does on many occasions), highlighting the centrality of this contingency. As for the moral salience of actions performed by fictional characters instead of real human beings, again we should instead view this as being central to Daoud’s endeavour: we as readers are thereby encouraged to enter Harun’s fictional world and engage faithfully with the actions of characters as moral agents, treating them with all the seriousness and emotion that we would real people.

1. ***Knowledge of the Other, from ‘the Other’***

Let us now use this epistemic framework to look the novel in more detail, and the issues about which Harun gains Franciscan knowledge through the activity of reading. He describes the revelatory experience of reading ‘The Other’ for the first time: ‘I held it as if spellbound. At one and the same time, I felt insulted and revealed to myself. I spent the whole night reading that book. My heart was pounding, I was about to suffocate, it was like reading a book written by God himself.’[[29]](#footnote-29) Harun continues, ‘[reading] allowed me to understand, little by little, how your hero saw the world’,[[30]](#footnote-30) and for him this is an experience which helps him make sense of his own world. Harun tells us upon reading ‘The Other’,‘[i]t let me see into the murderer’s soul as if I were his angel’.[[31]](#footnote-31) In this moment, He begins to recognise the ways in which he is kindred to Meursault, and even their shared humanity. Discovering an affinity between himself and the man he considered an enemy for so long, he refers to the two of them as ‘the pair, him and me, the unlikeliest of twins’.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In coming to recognise his enemy as a human being, Harun begins to separate the political from the personal. He tells us, ‘[i]f you had met me a few decades ago, I would have served you up the version with the prostitute slash Algerian land and the settler who abuses her with repeated rapes and violence. But I’ve gained some distance now.’**[[33]](#footnote-33)** This does not, of course, make the injustice of colonisation more forgivable, but it does allow Harun to look beyond this context to the individuals behind it. He says, ‘[w]hen your hero dwells on his mother, I understand him better than I do when he talks about my brother’[[34]](#footnote-34)—Harun can relate to Meursault on a personal level, but the cultural estrangement which consists in Meursault’s crime (i.e. his own inability to empathise with the Arabic community) nevertheless separates them. Even in this ineliminable moment of estrangement, however, Harun shows that an awareness of otherness is the key to reflecting on the self. He tells us, ‘[t]here’s always another, my friend. In love, in friendship, or even on a train, there he is, the other, sitting across from you and staring at you, or turning his back on you and deepening the perspectives of your solitude.’[[35]](#footnote-35) This insight is brought into fruition through reading, and it is this element of Harun’ experience which I suggest has wider ethical implications. Harun eventually comes to reflect on other judgements he has made of others who inhibited this space between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in which he now resides, specifically the Arabic women who (to some extent) were liberated by contact with French culture. He tells us, ‘[n]ow there *were* a few skirt-wearing, firm-breasted Algerian women who shuttled between our world and the world of the *roumis*, down into the French neighborhoods. We brats stoned them with our eyes.’[[36]](#footnote-36) In acknowledging his own previous lack of understanding, Harun demonstrates the beginnings of an ethical growth.

While Harun of course cannot forgive the murder of his brother, the similarities between himself and Meursault that he discovers in the book enable him to understand— even to empathise—with its protagonist. Indeed, Harun too has blood on his hands—he commits a murder just as lacking in motivation—an act of revenge exacted upon the wrong Frenchman. He seems to relate to arbitrariness of Meursault’s crime, describing how, ‘during the summer, when the sun’s so close to earth it can make you crazy or even drive you to shed blood’[[37]](#footnote-37)—precisely Meursault’s excuse.[[38]](#footnote-38) Again, paraphrasing *The Outsider*, he describes how the sound of his gun being fired ‘was like two sharp raps on the door of deliverance’[[39]](#footnote-39)—where Meursault’s crime leads him to be condemned, Harun is freed by its repetition. In this, we see again that Harun’s world is the flip-side of Meursault’s: while Meursault’s crime was thoughtless, Harun’s was premeditated; while Musa was murdered at two o’clock in the afternoon, the Frenchman is killed at two o’clock in the morning;[[40]](#footnote-40) while Musa remained anonymous, Harun gives his victim a name—Joseph Larquais.[[41]](#footnote-41) Having found that he too is capable of taking a life, he contemplates the act of murder on Meursault’s behalf, telling us, ‘The Other is a unit of measurement you lose when you kill.’[[42]](#footnote-42) Unlike Meursault, Harun walks free—a fact which brings him no comfort. He says, ‘[t]he gratuitousness of Musa’s death was unconscionable. And now my revenge had just been struck down to the same level of insignificance.’[[43]](#footnote-43) In the violent context of the War of Independence, the French became the oppressed and their killing was no longer considered a crime. When Harun turns himself in, the police officer questioning him is just as complacent about this murder as Meursault was about Musa’s,[[44]](#footnote-44) and thus Harun finds himself in the face of the same emptiness and estrangement which so defines Musa’s murder.

As we are beginning to see, the Franciscan knowledge ‘The Other’ imparts helps Harun to comprehend how he relates to Meursault, and the colonial society he represents. Harun is able to identify their cultural points of departure, but in encountering the ‘what-it’s-like-ness’ of Meursault’s experiences through reading ‘The Other’, Harun is also brought to reflect upon his own experience of cultural alienation. He tells us that Meursault is ‘*el-roumi*, the foreigner, the stranger’,[[45]](#footnote-45) and clearly the unhomeliness—the uncanny—of postcolonial Algeria leaves both Meursault and Harun as outsiders. Focusing on Harun’s and Meursault’s relationship with their homeland itself, Luke Richardson points out the tension which motivates this need for empathy:

Meursault has rejected an offer to return to Paris choosing instead the pleasure of colonial life, which he enjoys—like swimming, and sunshine. At the beach he and Marie contrast with Masson and his Parisian accented wife, the old generation of French-born immigrants who seem out of place, are pale, overweight, swim poorly. Marie and Meursault are the new generation, born in the country, […] They are tanned, at home, swim perfectly. The Arabs enter this settled dynamic and instantly disrupt it. Their mere presence is demonstrative that the land Meursault [loves] is not, in fact, his. That this new French Algerian identity is founded on an illegitimacy—the illegitimacy of colonial conquest. If he has rejected France, but Algeria rejects him, the *pied noir* is a child of nowhere, a permanent outsider’[[46]](#footnote-46)

Harun most certainly is able to get a sense of this dynamic from his own reading of ‘The Other’. He remarks himself,‘How he must have suffered, poor man! To be the child of a place that never gave you birth…’[[47]](#footnote-47) Whilst the text of *The Meursault Investigation* revolves around the suffering of Harun and of Arabic Algeria, it also taps into the homelessness of second generation French-Algerians, such as Camus himself.

Similarly, Algeria’s linguistic history naturally plays a key role in the way Harun makes sense of the world. Like *The Outsider*, *The Meursault Investigation* was originally written in French. Harun’s mother tongue, however, was of course Arabic, and he talks wistfully about the characteristics of Arabic, describing it as ‘rich, full of imagery, vitality, sudden jolts, and improvisations, but not too big on precision’.[[48]](#footnote-48) But, as much as anything else, this novel is about the difficulty of finding a means of communicating the experience of the oppressed,[[49]](#footnote-49) and so Harun ‘had to learn a language other than that one. To survive.’[[50]](#footnote-50) In order to understand Meursault and his writing, and to communicate his own story, Harun was compelled to learn French. In the act of learning this new language, the language of the coloniser, he is no doubt surrendering something of the Arabic side of his identity, but he also gains a new perspective, a new idea of the duality at the core of his own postcolonial identity. We are told, ‘The French language fascinated me like a puzzle, and beyond it lay the solution to the dissonances of my world’.[[51]](#footnote-51) He says elsewhere: ‘Books and your hero’s language gradually enabled me to name things differently and to organise the world with my own words’.[[52]](#footnote-52) Through reading Meursault’s words, he gains Franciscan knowledge of an alternative perspective of the world. Before colonisation, the Arabic language would have been suitable as a tool for understanding himself and his homeland, but in the fractured postcolonial environment he inhabits, something new—an element of otherness—is necessary. The language that Harun comes to use reflects this: Harun’s French is peppered with Arabic words, giving it a whole new character. Harun explains this choice:

I’ve learned to speak this language, and to write in it too … I’m going to do what was done in this country after Independence: I’m going to take the stones from the old houses the colonists left behind, remove them one by one, and build my own house, my own language[[53]](#footnote-53)

Harun’s identity, like Algeria’s identity, is one shaped and scarred by colonialism. Even now, after Independence, France has not been erased from Algeria; its absence is visceral. Until he learns to read French, he is alienated by his inability to speak the language of the coloniser. Once he reads ‘The Other’, Harun begins to understand the alienation *of* the coloniser, and recognise this as a human experience, one he can relate to.

Via his reading of ‘The Other’, he also comes feels kindred to Meursault in his atheism: where Meursault rejects Christianity, Harun rejects Islam. He tells us, ‘I’ll go as far as to say I abhor all religions. All of them! Because they falsify the weight of the world.’[[54]](#footnote-54) A famous scene in *The Outsider* is the one in which Meursault spends an entire Sunday on his balcony watching the world go by, not leaving the apartment because of his alienation from the Christian day of rest.[[55]](#footnote-55) Conversely, Harun tells us, ‘[a]ctually it’s Fridays I don’t like. I often spend them on the balcony of my apartment, looking at the people, the streets and the mosque.’[[56]](#footnote-56) In the final chapter of *The Outsider,* Meursault unleashes a frustrated tirade at a priest visiting his cell, but Harun tells us, ‘in my case, there’s a whole pack of religious fanatics hounding me’,[[57]](#footnote-57) referring to the dogma of Islam in Algeria since Independence. These complex encounters between the cultures of France and Arabic-Algeria forge the traits which in some ways define the personalities of Harun and Meursault, and through reading ‘The Other’Harun realises how kindred they are. He tells us: ‘I was looking for traces of my brother in the book, and what I found instead was my own reflection, I discovered I was practically the murderer’s double […It was like a] mirror held up to my soul and to what would become of me in this country, between Allah and ennui.’[[58]](#footnote-58) In the final scene of the book, he recounts the time that an imam tried to talk to him about God, and it is here that he once and for all merges with Meursault, quoting *The Outsider* at some points word for word; both voices speak at once from a place of otherness and estrangement.[[59]](#footnote-59) While both Harun and Meursault are kindred in their irreligiousness, in the following section I will examine my claim that, through narrative engagement, Harun is able to benefit from a different kind of faith.

1. ***Faith and Redemption: Meursault’s Defence***

The system of difference that Harun is able to create (through Franciscan knowledge) enables him to relate to Meursault, but that is only the first movement made in this dialogue between supposed enemies. At the core of Harun’s identity is a profound sense of guilt—not only the guilt he feels for outliving his brother Musa, or indeed for his own senseless violence, but also for abandoning the religion and the political cause so important to many Algerians of his generation (that is, Islam and the fight for Independence). For readers today, it is easy enough to sympathise with Harun, as the injustice of colonialism can no longer be ignored; Harun need not be redeemed. However, my analysis of *The Meursault Investigation* depends on us achieving something which is perhaps more difficult—that is, learning to understand and re-humanise the apparently conscienceless coloniser. While we have already seen some evidence for the painful alienation of second generation French-Algerians, we are likely to encounter more resistance when trying to reconcile Meursault himself, due to his indefensible crime; Harun, however, is able to sympathise and relate to Meursault. This section, therefore, will highlight several instances of Camus’ novel which might enable readers of Meursault’s narrative to sympathise with him in a way which would not be possible without engagement with his narrative (i.e. if we were in the position of his jury). In keeping with this article’s non-religious application of Franciscan knowledge, I will explore the effect of Meursault’s narrative in terms of ‘faith in the Other’.

Meursault’s own guilt, and lack of awareness of it, is of course central to *The Outsider*. Meursault kills a human being and believes himself to be innocent until he sees himself through the eyes of his jury.[[60]](#footnote-60) His lack of remorse towards the ‘the Arab’ is not only important in the text itself, it is also the lynch-pin of many readings of *The Meursault Investigation*[[61]](#footnote-61). However, there are many times when, as readers of *The Outsider*, we (and Harun) are able to identify the fact that Meursault does indeed have a conscience, and while he often appears to repress it, is has an undeniable effect on his behaviour. For example, when his mother dies, he feels compelled to apologise to his boss when he needs to ask for time off work. He says, ‘[i]t’s not my fault’,[[62]](#footnote-62) betraying a feeling of guilt towards his mother for having relinquished her care. When he arrives at her retirement home and meets the warden, his guilty conscience once again resurfaces and we are told, ‘I felt as if he was reproaching me’.[[63]](#footnote-63) We also know that she was bored and unhappy living with her young son—‘[w]hen she was at home, she used to spend all her time watching me in silence’[[64]](#footnote-64), but that he never adjusts to her absence from his apartment, instead living like Miss Havisham in the debris of another life. He tells us,

It was just right when mother was here. But now it’s too big for me and I’ve had to move the dining-room table into my bedroom. I live in just this one room now, with some rather saggy cane chairs, a wardrobe with a mirror that’s gone yellow, a dressing-table and a brass bed. The rest is a mess.’[[65]](#footnote-65)

While his living like a hermit in his own house may yet again stem from a feeling of guilt towards his mother, this certainly shows that when the prosecutor at Meursault’s trial accuses him of ‘burying his mother like a heartless criminal’[[66]](#footnote-66), he has missed something that we (and indeed Harun) have not. In these moments of recognition, we are able to develop a kind faith in Meursault, compelled by (as Stump would put it) a second-person experience of him through narrative. This is how he is redeemed in Harun’s eyes.

Of course, Meursault’s defence in court is undeniably weak. He cannot account for the evidence against him, and he is unwilling to embellish his story to gain the sympathy of the court. The reason that Meursault is unable to make his jury understand his lack of motive is because, we might say, he tells *the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth*. Throughout the novel, the style that Camus uses to construct Meursault’s story is clipped and matter-of-fact. Thanks to the imaginative activity required by reading the novel, we as readers are able to get a sense of him as a person—but in court the simplicity of his testimony fails him. All that can be inferred from Meursault’s clumsy and brief account is his guilt. It is precisely for this reason that Camus can claim, somewhat controversially, that ‘one wouldn’t be far wrong in seeing *The Outsider* as the story of a man who, without any heroic pretensions, agrees to die for the truth’.[[67]](#footnote-67) It is obvious to any reader of *The Outsider* that something is missing from Meursault’s testimony—he fails to engage his audience’s (the jury’s) imagination and therefore they are unable to put themselves in his position, whereas we readers can. Meursault’s estrangement in the courtroom turns into demonisation. The failure of Meursault’s truthful account of his crime to gain any allies is what really represents the absurd in this novel: the conflict between faith and reason. From our faith in Meursault (cultivated by imaginative engagement), we as readers cannot fail to feel for him, to be horrified by his fate and frustrated when his words fail him. Here we see that sometimes the facts aren’t enough when attempting to determine something as nebulous as justice. It is precisely this effect that Eleonore Stump is pointing towards in her critique of Dominican systems of knowledge. Ethical understanding can be extraneous to factual information, which is why no jury would acquit Meursault. By failing to appeal to the emotions and sympathy of the jury he allowed himself to become an outsider—they are unable to read him in the way that Harun is.

In the colonial moment that Meursault (and indeed Camus) inhabited, there is little opportunity to reflect on one’s life through the eyes of the repressed other (i.e. the Arabic-Algerian community). This is precisely what is missing from *The Outsider*. Harun, however, is given the opportunity, through reading ‘The Other’, to look at Algeria through a lens that is less fractured than the postcolonial through which he normally sees. While this alternative lens has its blind-spots (such as ‘the Arab’ himself), it enables Harun to see what has been erased by the War of Independence, and this flip-side makes Harun’s own world view more complete, more cohesive. It is for this reason that ‘The Other’represents the necessity for Harun of making sense of the colonised self through the engagement with the colonised Other. While we may be able to forgive Harun his faults easily enough, until he has read ‘The Other’, he is crippled by his own guilt—guilt for the ways in which he feels alienated from Arabic Algeria. After reading Meursault’s story, however, he not only re-humanises his brother’s killer, he also finds redemption for his own guilt towards his culture and mother country, coming to understand that his fractured identity is a product of an (until that moment) invisible Other. It is Meursault, this Other, in which his faith finds purchase.

1. ***Conclusion***

In this article I have argued that, through attaining Franciscan knowledge from encountering literary narrative, readers are able to engage in a kind of non-religious faith-building practice. At the centre of this text is Harun and Meursault’s homeland, Algeria, and the many cultural conflicts that the country is so familiar with. Naturally, these issues play an important role in many readings of this text, but instead of simply being a critique of Camus’ colonial blinkers, I have suggested that the contrasts between Meursault and Harun (French-Algerian and Arab-Algerian) are deployed as part of a wider ethical venture; this novel is most definitely about postcolonial identity, but it has ethical implications can which move beyond this context. It is about coming to understand a common humanity which transcends the dichotomy of colonised/coloniser. As Kamel Daoud put it, ‘what interests me is humanity, not their passport.’[[68]](#footnote-68)

What Harun in *The Meursault Investigation* learns from Meursault in *The Outsider* is not that Meursault’s beliefs or perspective on the world is more accurate or justified than his own; instead he learns the *possibility* of Meursault’s perspective, and comes to understand the causes and effects of such a perspective. The otherness of this perspective thereby throws his own into sharp relief, and the sameness and difference he experiences through the text help him to learn both about himself and the Other. This understanding, I suggest, helps Harun to rebuild faith in his life; he acquires faith in the Other, and despite the fractured postcolonial perspective he inhabits, he is able to transcend his sense of estrangement, and to re-humanise Meursault. In this sense, Daoud carries on Camus’ own venture of promoting intersubjective ethical reflection,[[69]](#footnote-69) using the backdrop of postcolonial Algeria to provide a plethora of self/other distinctions. In learning the story of Meursault, Harun discovers ‘what-it’s-like’ for the Other, and in doing so is brought to reflect upon himself: how he differs from him, yet how he is the same. When we read these two novels side by side, it becomes much easier to appreciate the trauma present on both sides of colonialism, the alienation and fragmentation of identity that the inheritors of colonialism experience, but it also shows that sometimes, dialogues between oppressed and oppressor such as these can enable us to *relate to* and *have faith in* those we may otherwise consider our enemy.

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9. My conception of ‘The Other’ is roughly in line with that of Levinas’ (as developed in Levinas, E. (1987). *Time and the Other.* Translated by R. A. Cohen. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, and elsewhere), but it is not within the scope of the current paper to engage with Levinas’ work in any great detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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12. Countless titles approach this text: prominent recent examples include Alice Kaplan’s *Looking for the Stranger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) and *Albert Camus’s The Stranger: Critical Essays*, a diverse collection of essays dedicated to the novel, edited by Peter Francev (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A trend sparked by Edward Saïd’s analysis in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), as well as Connor Cruise O'Brien’s in *Albert Camus: Of Europe and Africa*, (New York: Viking Press, 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For a detailed analysis of the philosophical content of *The Outsider*, please see Whistler, Grace. (2018). ‘Authenticity and Style in Camus’ *L’Etranger*’, *Intersubjectivity and Values: Phenomenological Perspectives*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Other literary attempts to address this deficit include Leila Aboulela’s radio play *The Insider* (2013, BBC Radio 3. London: British Broadcasting Corporation), which reimagined the lives of the Arabic characters of the novel in the postcolonial era, and Emteaz Hussain’s play, *Outsiders* (2015, directed by Fraser Corfield, Pilot Theatre), which continues the story after Meursault’s trial and execution, focussing on the marginalised women in the story (Arabic-Algerian and French-Algerian), Sumaya, ‘The Arab’s’ sister, and Marie, Meursault’s girlfriend. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation,* p.127 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid,* p.46 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Daoud in an interview with Maciej Kałuża (*Presence d'Albert Camus*, 2018 forthcoming). In the original French: ‘Je crois que c’est le même rapport qu'ont les décolonisés avec les colonisateurs: un rapport plein de fascination et de colère; un rapport de ressemblance et de rejet. Je pense que ce lien entre Haroun et Meursault regarde profondément le lien qu’on a vis-à-vis d’une époque et d’un colonisateur et d’une culture. Et un rapport avec nous-mêmes.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Stump, *Wandering in Darkness,* p.46 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Needless to say, her use of these terms is not intended to exhaustively define these complex traditions, but rather to highlight a tendency within them to help elucidate her own theory of knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid.,* p.41 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For further reading on the transformative and ethical powers of narrative, please see: Kearney, Richard. (2003). ‘Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance’, *Imagination and its Pathologies* edited by James Philips and James Morley. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p.51-63; and Ricœur, Paul. (1991). ‘Life in Quest of Narrative’, *On Paul Ricœur : Narrative and Interpretation*, edited by David Wood. London: Routledge. pp. 20-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. From a postcolonial perspective, it might seem somewhat problematic to utilise a category from the Christian tradition in the analysis of a text which challenges the erasure of ‘the Arab’ in *The Outsider*, but despite Stump’s background in Christian theology, she is trying to make a broad claim about the possibility of learning from narrative (rather than just saying something specific about scripture), and so her choice of terminology is unfortunate, but incidental to the philosophical point being made. At this point it also seems pertinent to emphasise the fact that, although *The Meursault Investigation* challenges colonialism and Christianity, it is also critical of conservative Islam and its categorical rejection of the European influences on Algerian culture (more will be said on this matter in section 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Stump, *Wandering in Darkness,* p.80 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid.*, p.52 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Other discussions, in the context of epistemology, of understanding gained through engagement with literature, include Eleonore Stump’s use of examples from Trollope’s Palliser novels (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*,p.53), and László Kajtár’s recent paper, ‘What Mary Didn’t Read: Literary Narratives and Knowledge’ (2016, *Ratio* 29: 3), in which he uses a similar reconstruction to describe the phenomenon of fear of death experienced upon reading Cormack McCarthy’s *The Road*. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Jackson, ‘Epiphenomenal qualia’, p.127–136. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The powerfulness of this experience is perhaps what has invoked such strong responses from readers such as Fraser. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*,p.130 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Ibid.*, p.132 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid.*, p.131 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Ibid.*, p.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Ibid.*, p.62 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid.*, p.36 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid.*, p.73 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Ibid.*, p.19 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*, p.55 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Meursault tells us, ‘[m]ixing up my words a bit and realizing that I sounded ridiculous, I said quickly that it was because of the sun. Some people laughed’ (Camus, Albert. (2000). *The Outsider*. London: Penguin, p.99). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*, p.85 (compared to Meursault’s ‘it was like giving four sharp knocks on the door of unhappiness’, Camus, *The Outsider*,p.60). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Ibid.,* p.79 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Ibid.,* p.88 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Ibid.,* p.90 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Ibid.,* p.111 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Ibid.,* p.111 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Ibid.,* p.34 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Richardson, ‘Did Camus Kill an Arab?’, Camus Society Conference, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*,p.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
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50. *Ibid.,* p.37 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Ibid.,* p.119 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
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54. *Ibid.,* p.69 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
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57. *Ibid.,* p.139 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Ibid.,* p.131 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Ibid.,* p. 140-142 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. When at last he tells us, ‘for the first time I realized that I was guilty’ *Ivi,* p.87 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. E.g. Brozgal’s, and Fraser’s, as previously mentioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Camus, *The Outsider*, p.9 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *Ivi*, p.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *Ivi*, p 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. *Ivi,* p.25 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *Ivi,* p.93 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
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