The redemptive power of absurd walls in the *Stranger*

As far as we can tell, Camus' commitment to the absurd as a literary and philosophical mission had begun in May 1936, the same month he defended his dissertation on the subject of Neoplatonism at the University of Algiers.[1] "Philosophical work: Absurdity," he wrote in his journal. Two years later, he repeated the same commitment in two more mentions. Already then, while still at the phase of research and contemplation, he determined to tackle the subject, almost simultaneously, through three genres: a novel, a play, and an essay. *Caligula* came first;[2] the *Stranger*, the "novel of the absurd,"[3] ensued, and quickly after, the *Myth of Sisyphus* - the "essay on the absurd" - came into being.[4]

Naming this creative cycle the "three absurds",[5] Camus' initial intention was to have them published as a single volume.[6] Although the three belonged to different genres, he clearly devised them as a unified, profoundly interconnected body of work. When the task was completed, he declared, "Beginnings of liberty," as if he first had to get the absurd off his chest.[7] This was only his first "myth," one out of prospective trio which he never managed to complete,[8] yet as much as he "progressed beyond" his three absurds, he "remained faithful" to the "exigency which prompted them".[9]

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[1] Robert Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2013), 14.
[2] In terms of realization of the three projects, *Caligula* came last: it was first performed in 1945.
[3] I have borrowed the term from Bombert's 1948 article title "Camus and the Novel of the 'Absurd.'"
[4] Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living,* 15-16.
[5] Matthew Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe: To Return to Our Beginnings* (Brill Academic Pub, 2015), 41.
[6] John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (Routledge, 2008), 14.
[7] Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe,* 41.
[8] Sisyphus was meant to be followed by the myth of Prometheus and the myth of Nemesis. An even broader plan consisted of five stages: absurd, revolt, judgment, love, and 'creation corrected,' each expressed in the form of a novel, a play, and an essay (Sharpe 2015: 41).
[9] Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, Vintage books USA, 1991), vi.

Among the various critiques which welcomed the *Stranger* upon its release in 1942 - all, either good or mixed, rejected by Camus as "based on misunderstandings" -[10] Sartre's "Explication of *The Stranger*" stood out for its undeniable lucidity. Sartre, writes Zaretsky, filtered the baffling novel "through the insights of the philosophical essay".[11] Obviously inspired by Camus' own distinction between the "feeling of the absurd" and the "notion of the absurd",[12] he argued that the *Myth* aims at "giving us this idea" whereas the *Stranger* is intended to give us the feeling. Indeed, just as the feeling of the absurd "lays the foundations" for the concept yet it is not limited to it and can even go further thanks to its aliveness,[13] so too the *Stranger* silently thrusts us into the territory of the absurd, leaving it to the *Myth* to "illumine the landscape".[14]

Brombert[15] justifiably questions Sartre's approach that considers the essay a key to the novel. Claiming that such an approach is "neither logical nor truly critical," he comments that the reader of the *Stranger* cannot be expected to have read the *Myth*. While a writer's essays can be used to further elucidate their works, they cannot be employed as a starting point: a literary work should contain its own explanation, functioning as both the "communicating vehicle" and that which is communicated.[16] On the basis of this rationale, I would like to suggest here to do the exact opposite: to set the *Stranger* not as a representation of the absurd hero which merely "exhibits"[17] yet never really lives, but rather as a starting point, a foundation, a way to throw more light on the concept of the absurd as presented in the *Myth* yet to even go further. From this perspective, the *Myth* branches out from the *Stranger* as its "philosophical twin" to transform

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[10] Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living,* 43.
[11] Ibid., 43.
[12] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'brien (Penguin Books, 2005), 27.
[13] (Ibid., 27)
[14] Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (Routledge, 2005), 141.
[15] Victor Brombert, *Camus and the Novel of the "Absurd"* (Yale French Studies, No. 1, Existentialism, 1948), 119.
[16] (Ibid., 121).
[17] See, for example, Foley's interpretation (2008: 14-22), which starts with Sisyphus and from there, delves into the novel as a demonstration of the essay's concepts of "wild courage and rebellious scorn."

images into thoughts.[18] I shall do this not to protect the *Stranger's* literary independence, but because I believe that this option is closer to Camus' own intention as well as the nature of Camus' absurdism.

As far as Camus' absurdism is concerned, one could say that the right order is from art to the "phenomenology of the 'notion of the absurd'".[19] This cannot be otherwise, since in a universe devoid of metaphysical realities and platonic essences, the "concrete signifies nothing more than itself"[20] and thus, all thought can do is cover "with images what has no reason".[21] Now philosophy serves appearances and not the other way around. While universal concepts bend before life's particularities and pluralities, reason cannot "comprehensively explain" yet it can "lucidly describe"[22] as well as imitate life and duplicate its experiences.[23] Camus' 1952 praise of Melville's writings reflects well his own approach of absurd creation: "In Melville the symbol grows out of reality, the image springs from perception".[24]

Adding to the fact that in an absurd universe, a philosophical novel holds more of the feeling and experience of the absurd than an essay does, is Camus' belief that fiction better combats such a universe's immanent nihilism.[25] To promote the "ideal of authentic life," which transcends "rational discourse," one requires concrete images rather than abstracts - emotionally-engaging images that effectively arouse the sufficient pathos and "existential anguish" against which readers can transcend nihilism and grow in authenticity.[26] The philosophical novel frees

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[18] Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity, 130.*
[19] (Ibid., 120-121).
[20] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 94.
[21] (Ibid., 95)
[22] Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe,* 43-45.
[23] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 92.
[24] Peter Dunwoodie, *From Noces to L'Etranger*, ed., Edward J Hughes (The Cambridge Companion to Camus, Cambridge University Press, 2007), 162.
[25] See, for instance, Camus' claim in his preface to Nicolas Chamfort works: "[O]ur greatest moralists are not makers of maxims—they are novelists" (quoted from Sharpe 2015: 45-46).
[26] Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity,* 120.

the universe from illusion and occupies it instead with "truths of flesh and blood" to entice the reader to revolt without hope.[27]

By first grounding ourselves in the novel, considering it a more potent holder of the feeling and experience of the absurd - and accordingly, reading the *Myth* as its conceptual extension and transformation into thought - we may gain an interpretation that moves away from the ones offered by most commentators. The *Stranger* has attracted a great deal of social, cultural, political, and psychological readings.[28] Indeed, it was Camus himself who insisted that the novel possessed a "social" meaning too,[29] explicitly guiding the reader to focus on the main character's refusal to "play the game" and to subject himself to collective untruthfulness.[30] Yet even a commentator such as Foley,[31] who follows Camus' advice, recognizes that the social intention suffocates under the "sheer metaphysical weight" of the novel's wish to convey the inner and intimate journey of the absurd mind.[32]

Following this suggested direction of reading reveals the novel as a description of a step-by-step process of the awakening of a dormant consciousness to the reality of the absurd; its initial failure to respond to it; the methodical approach it employs to embrace it, and the consequential inner liberation it achieves. As Zaretsky[33] puts it, *the Stranger* is before anything else a case of "forming a mind"; the emergence of a genuine self-reflection. Thus, deciphering the novel's symbols extricates and throws light on the very same methodology applied by Camus

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[27] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 99.

[28] See, for example, psychological analyses of: Stamm 1969; Slochower 1969, Ohayon 1983, and Scherr 2014. See also O'Brien's overtly political reading from 1970; Dunwoodie's cultural interpretation from 2007, and philosophical readings, such as Golomb 2005 and Foley 2008, which place the novel within the context of individual/society relations, as the absurd individual's struggle for integrity.

[29] John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt*, 21.

[30] Stephen Ohayon, Camus' The Stranger: The Sun-Metaphor and Patricidal Conflict, *American Imago* 40. No. 2 (1983): 189.

[31] Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt*, 21.

[32] This is Brombert's central criticism (1948: 121-123) - that the novel's literary weakness is that Camus breathes into the main character's nostrils the "life of his own mind," forcing him to express the author's ideas.

[33] Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living,* 45-46.

in the *Myth*, with its first part corresponding with the *Myth's* first 26 pages (capturing the feeling of the absurd), its second part - with pages 27-114 (the persistent negation of all hope), and its ending with pages 115-119 (the absurd elevation). At the heart of the *Stranger*, I shall claim, lies the same principle that guides the journey of the *Myth* - that limits, whether they are the *Stranger's* concrete prison walls or the *Myth's* abstract absurd walls, do not only define human nature, but also hold a surprising redemptive power which is the crux of the absurdist enlightenment.

Part One: An initial awakening

Much of the *Stranger's* first part is narrated in a literary style which directly expresses the climate of the absurd. As Sartre observed, its "atomistic sentences in the present tense," with "arbitrary facticity" and with no rational connection to bind them, isolate each moment from all others, emptying life of any "meaningful context".[34] Devoid of past or future, Meursault merely slides through "an endless procession of present moments",[35] embodying what the *Myth* later captured as "that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate".[36]

Yet this style, which describes but never explains, establishes more than the feeling of the absurd: the broken reality reflects a disjointed consciousness, which still does not exist as a self-reflective mind. The hollow narrative nearly caricatures Hume's 'bundle' theory of the self; its use of language allows us to penetrate into Meursault's "innermost life" only to realize that there is nothing there.[37] Not only is it devoid of any interiority, but it is literally incapable of self-

[34] Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity,* 131-132.
[35] Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living,* 23.
[36] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119.
[37] Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity,* 131-132.

awareness: when Meursault glances at the mirror, all that is reflected in it is "a corner of my table with my alcohol lamp next to some pieces of bread";[38] there is simply "not yet a self to be seen".[39] It is a "truly transparent" consciousness,[40] which requires other people and objects to mirror its own modes, like self-judgment, the need to cry, apathy and the inner voice that troubles it.[41] As Golomb[42] states, the Meursault of the first part is very far from a paragon of authenticity: his inability to lie reflects no courage but rather a purely "spontaneous" and "uncomplicated" mind, which lacks any duality or struggle within itself.[43]

This barely-existent consciousness, nevertheless, is pushed to awaken by two elements: death and the light of truth. Death, the most unrejectable limit of consciousness and life, opens and concludes the *Stranger*. The confrontation with life's ultimate limit unconsciously ignites in Meursault the "Why?," the protest against meaninglessness. For the first time consciousness opens one eye to meet with reality, yet it still manages to fall asleep again.[44] That is because the death of another - even of a dear one - does not necessarily suffice to shake one up completely. As Scherr[45] points out, in the unconscious no one believes in their own death, since the individual is unable to conceive the death of one's ego; only a fully conscious awareness of the frontiers of *our* life (as direct as Meursault's confrontation with it in the *Stranger's* second part) may hold the power to do that. The *Myth* echoes this reality, when Camus argues that the death

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38 Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (Vintage Books, 1988), 24.
39 Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living,* 25.
40 Victor Brombert, *Camus and the Novel of the "Absurd"*, 120.
41 Camus, *The Stranger*, 10-11.
42 Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity,* 130.
43 Dunwoodie, *From Noces to L'Etranger*, 157.
44 Camus, *The Stranger*, 4, 7.
45 Arthur Scherr, "Camus and the Denial of Death: Meursault and Caligula," *Omega* 69, no. 2 (2014): 170, 176.

of others is but an unconvincing rumor and that there is no way to prepare for death, since all we know is life and consciousness.[46]

Yet, as soon as death pierces into Meursault's sleepy mind and life, light begins to agitate him. In front of his mother's closed casket, he is "blinded" by the light and the brightness of the room, and only feels more drowsy;[47] again, a physical light that in the *Myth* turns into the subdued, abstract light of absurdity[48] which everyone evades, hoping for a "flight from light," as it compels a painful lucidity "in the face of experience".[49] This second catalyst of awakening is noncausal and random; it may strike "at any street corner,"[50] and its most demanding representation is the sun.

The sun in the *Stranger* is the sun of the absurd[51], the one that has remained to glow ever since humanity committed the crime of patricide against the heavenly father. It is perhaps not coincidental that Nietzsche - according to Camus, "the most famous of God's assassins" -[52] uses the same symbol when exclaiming that, with the murder of God, we have "unchained this earth from its sun" and are therefore "moving away from all suns".[53] Meursault's consciousness is forced to awaken in light of the absurdist reality which radiates unbearably and scorchingly over his head, in a Nietzschean, godless, nihilistic, and a-moral world. The sun is the uninvited

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46 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 14.
47 Camus, *The Stranger*, 8, 9.
48 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 9.
49 (Ibid., 3)
50 (Ibid., 9)
51 Ohayon (Camus' The Stranger: The Sun-Metaphor and Patricidal Conflict, *American Imago,* 189-205) devotes his entire article to the contrary argument that the *Stranger's* sun is the metaphor of "patriarchal absolutism" (Ibid, 193), acting as the negative image of the father-God. Accordingly, Meursault is the rebellious son. This is disputable: first, the father-God is sufficiently represented in the novel by the magistrate and the chaplain, and second, it does not make sense that God, who is represented by moralists such as the magistrate and the chaplain, would at the same time urge him to kill the Arab.
52 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 106.
53 R.J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139.

"awareness of the immanent nature of the world," which rises as soon as the ethic that was our beacon has lost its power on us.[54]

Interestingly, as the bright light of the phenomenal world, so long as the sun warms moderately, it illumines life's objects of pleasure and the sensual earth - in a way similar to Camus' conception of the life-affirming sun in the *Noces*.[55] When it grows in strength and becomes achingly dazzling, however, it lays bare the reality of the earth's emptiness and oppressive inhumanity[56] and compels consciousness to actually see the "Nada that could only have originated in a country crushed by the sun."[57] In such a condition, it is undefeatable and all-pervasive: "If you go slowly, you risk getting sunstroke. But if you go too fast, you work up a sweat and then catch a chill inside the church."[58] There is no way out: wherever one goes, whether in the atheistic direction or the theistic one, they would be confronted by the "inevitability of death," which renders one's life "absurd and unfulfilled."[59]

Indeed, the awakened mind that was formerly protected by unselfconsciousness and apathy, might not find a way out yet would at least seek its relief in an absurd rebellion. Here the paths of Meursault and Camus' other major absurd hero, Caligula, momentarily converge. Both characters conclude erroneously - Caligula in a far more deliberate tone - that an unbridled and destructive nihilistic outburst would be the proper response to the sun that blinds them. Both come out of a funeral of their loved ones with an "alarmed new consciousness of human mortality,"[60] and find themselves disorientedly driven to murder as a protest against death.

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54 Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity,* 132.
55 Dunwoodie, *From Noces to L'Etranger*, 152-154.
56 Camus, *The Stranger*, 15.
57 Dunwoodie, *From Noces to L'Etranger*, 155-156.
58 Camus, *The Stranger*, 17.
59 Scherr, "Camus and the Denial of Death: Meursault and Caligula," *Omega*, 179.
60 Scherr, "Camus and the Denial of Death: Meursault and Caligula," *Omega*, 186.

Incapable of embracing it, it is as if they attempt to "murder" death itself,[61] and at the same time, to initiate a seemingly predeterministic chain of events that would inevitably lead to their death; in a way, they substitute suicide for murder.

Just like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, who postulated that killing God means becoming a god yourself, yet was unable to handle the freedom he granted himself,[62] so too Meursault and Caligula infer that now "everything is unconditionally permitted," and in this climate assume the role of gods on earth, by a-morally "determining the fate of others."[63] They think that they go all the away with the illogical logic of the absurd, yet the novel and the play alike demonstrate that such a rebellion does not yield any liberating effect; what it really does is lead to the disillusionment that that is the wrong type of freedom.[64] While one might be tempted to blame the sun, in itself the sun does not necessarily push to nihilism; its role is only to show and to stimulate realization.

On that fateful day in which Meursault enacts the wrong type of freedom, two other symbols - which later become established in the *Myth* as concepts - are at play. The first is the sea, also represented by Meursault's lover Marie,[65] which momentarily enables a fulfillment of the longing for unity: "We felt a closeness as we moved in unison and were happy."[66] But in the same way that Sisyphus, who overly enjoyed the smiling earth and the "sparkling sea," is snatched "from his joys" by the gods and dragged to his rock -[67] after all, in an absurd universe one could never fully realize one's longing for unity - Meursault too must be torn away from the

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[61] This may be the cause of Meursault's unexplainable need to fire four more times at the Arab's clearly dead body (TS, 59).
[62] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 104-105.
[63] Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity,* 133-134.
[64] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Penguin Books, 2013), 63.
[65] According to Ohayon (Camus' The Stranger: The Sun-Metaphor and Patricidal Conflict, *American Imago*, 202): "Marie, mare, mere, mer, sea."
[66] Camus, *The Stranger*, 50.
[67] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 116.

experience to lucidly confront his reality. Accordingly, the sea grows weaker, gasping for air as it were, and finally is replaced by the sun's "sea of molten lead."[68] The sun, which inflicts the same inescapable pain of the funeral's day, soon introduces the second symbol: the silence which completes it.[69] In this climate, where there is nothing besides awareness and emptiness, and everything closes in around him, Meursault turns to the failed attempt to overpower and shake the silence of the indifferent universe.[70] Although the setting does seem to evoke hopeless action, it is Meursault who finally disrupts the unity and happiness and chooses to place himself in the persistent tension between the longing for harmony and the incapability of ever resting in its fulfillment.

Part Two: Prison as home

The *Stranger's* second part marks a distinct shift of consciousness, most instantly tangible in its far more complex and sophisticated literary style. A language of "assessment and reason," "cogitation and memory," takes the place of the raw and immediate language of "physicality, need and desire."[71] It announces Meursault's gradual evolution from an unthinking, transparent mind, to a "self-reflexive consciousness."[72] The reader is plunged into a rich subjective world of contradictory "feelings, motives and world outlook."[73] Yet we come somewhat prepared, since Meursault's declaration at the end of Part One that he shattered the

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68 Camus, *The Stranger*, 57-58.
69 (Ibid., 55)
70 (Ibid., 59)
71 Dunwoodie, *From Noces to L'Etranger*, 157-159.
72 (Ibid., 159-160).
73 Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity,* 131-132.

"exceptional silence of a beach where I'd been happy"[74] gives away a newfound awareness of an internal mood.

But why does Meursault grow in "self-awareness once he is imprisoned"?[75] Slochower[76] and Ohayon[77] argue that it his shooting of the Arab that causes Meursault's consciousness to come alive and to consolidate a self. This "original sin," writes Ohayon, "cracked Sisyphus' rock" and extricated fossilized thoughts and feelings, thus activating an "intrapsychic life." This, however, does not coincide with Camus' line of thought, especially when compared to "Caligula." Both play and novel are pronounced statements against nihilism, and their acts of murder reflect consciousness' failed attempt at overcoming absurd reality. If anything, it is Meursault's sobering up, his realization that that freedom was not the right one, which guided him toward a maturer way to handle the absurd - a way that ultimately enabled the crystallization of an authentic and reflective consciousness in him.[78] Rather than shattering the limits imposed on human consciousness, abiding wholeheartedly within these confines allows human existence to find its noblest fulfillment. Indeed, in such a godless world, what awakens and delivers consciousness is not the apparent freedom achieved by God's absence but the intense limits into which it voluntarily forces itself[79].

With the disappearance of hope - represented by the cessation of Marie's visits - Meursault can finally feel "at home" in his cell.[80] He is content to gaze at the sea through the small window, and to grip the bars with his face "straining toward the light," and favours his

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74 Camus, *The Stranger*, 59.
75 Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living,* 45-46.
76 Harry Slochower, "Camus' The Stranger: The Silent Society and the Ecstasy of Rage," *American Imago* 26, no. 3 (1969): 294.
77 Ohayon, Camus' The Stranger: The Sun-Metaphor and Patricidal Conflict, *American Imago*, 198-200.
78 Meursault, in this sense, is permitted by Camus to move beyond the point in which Caligula is halted.
79 One should note that the introspective style is significantly more prevalent from the second half of Part Two onwards - one more evidence that the realization of limits unifies Meursault's mind.
80 Camus, *The Stranger*, 72.

quiet and dark cell over the dizzying visiting room with its "harsh light pouring out of the sky" -[81] once again, rejecting the fulfillment of his longing for unity while keeping this longing aflame. He renounces fantasies of freedom and accepts the identity of a prisoner, likening himself to one who lives in the "trunk of a dead tree," from which he could only "look up at the sky."[82]

We have good reasons to suspect that Meursault unconsciously drives himself into his cell and eventual death sentence, which implies that to achieve authenticity, consciousness directs itself toward the recognition of its limits. It is plausible to speculate that after his mother's death, Meursault felt compelled to demonstrate that indeed, "there was no way out,"[83] by simulating a seemingly deterministic act. Scherr[84] suggests that the Arab was Meursault's "surrogate for his own death," a way to intimately experience death "without dying himself." Ohayon[85] sides with this view from a different angle, pointing out that Meursault does not repent since he wants to be sentenced to death.[86] Grounding himself in Camus' own words, that Meursault is the "only Christ we deserved," he shows the ways Meursault imitates Jesus' refusal to escape his fate by remaining silent as well as Jesus' self-image as a sacrificial offering to the world. Yet, just like Caligula, his wish for death cannot take the form of suicide, since the opposite of suicide is the "man condemned to death" -[87] and being condemned to death is the reality that the absurd hero must authentically confront.

While the sun was the great awakener of the first part, part two ushers the reader into the second catalyst of lucidity: the confinement of the prison cell - the difference being that the sun

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[81] (Ibid., 73)
[82] (Ibid., 76-77)
[83] (Ibid., 17)
[84] Scherr, "Camus and the Denial of Death: Meursault and Caligula," Omega, 179-180.
[85] Ohayon, Camus' The Stranger: The Sun-Metaphor and Patricidal Conflict, *American Imago*, 190-201.
[86] See also Clark ("Albert Camus and the Legal Unconscious: Symbolic and Imaginary Dimensions in The Stranger," *Journal of Camus Studies* (2017): 115), who demonstrates the different ways Meursault "could have claimed self-defense."
[87] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 53.

is an aggressive cosmic intervention, whereas the cell is a conscious choice of the absurd hero. Such a hero determines to "make his rock, or his prison walls, everything that he has,"[88] since by realizing that this prison cell is "all we have and all we need," we gain a key to self-transformation.[89] Truly, we all await our death sentence in the cosmic cell, with all that is left is an infinite sky above our head as out eternal longing. And so, the only thing a human being should be interested in is execution -[90] an unwavering acknowledgment of the limit of our life and consciousness. Such an acute recognition of being hanged sooner or later is one of the "few things" that "concentrate the mind" and cause an individual to come to oneself.[91] Indeed, one's authenticity is put to the test by the Heideggerian 'Being-towards-death' and forms through the manner in which one faces this terminal limit.[92]

Between these four absurd walls, Meursault - "the most faithful incarnation of Camus' absurd reasoning" -[93] throws himself into an unsparing process of renunciation, which clarifies much of the *Myth's* methodology of "persistence." Camus' philosophical criticism of scientific knowledge, religious belief and existentialist flight, has one real purpose: forcing the mind into a state of complete negation to allow an encounter with reality as it is. The "refusal to lie" is broadened to include even the subtlest form of mental escape. This is done with an "austere dignity,"[94] a monk-like type of abstinence, which demonstrates that pushing the absurd to its

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[88] Stefan Skrimshire, "A political theology of the absurd?," *Literature and Theology* Vol. 20, No. 3 (September 2006): 296.
[89] (Ibid., 297)
[90] Camus, *The Stranger*, 110.
[91] Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living,* 45-46.
[92] Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity,* 130.
[93] Skrimshire, "A political theology of the absurd?," *Literature and Theology*, 288.
[94] John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt*, 22.

"logical conclusions"[95] does not imply a nihilistic freedom but rather, a radical form of self-constraint.

Here comes to mind Camus' imagining of another absurd hero, Don Juan, sitting in a monastery's cell close to death and contemplating, "through a narrow slit in the sun-baked wall," a bland land in which he "recognizes himself."[96] Meursault too looks at the walls' stones for months, and finds in them neither metaphysical consolation nor earthly satisfaction.[97] One by one he abandons any comforting habit of both mind and body: desires and sensual passions, sex and smoking;[98] the knowledge of books,[99] and logical arguments.[100] When the priest enters, the embodiment of last hope, he feels his cell crowded and uncomfortable.[101] He learns the absurd through the attempts to evade it,[102] thus rejecting faith as a "safeguard against suffering and despair"[103] and removing the "little painted screens" that the priest holds in front of his face to "hide the scaffold" from him.[104] Not that he does not have his moments of tragic consciousness and revolt against the limits of existence in his own dark, endless night of Gethsemane as he awaits his antichrist crucifixion,[105] yet the struggle to escape the absurd, he knows, is an inseparable part of it.

3. An unexpected union

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95 Camus, *Caligula and Other Plays*, 45.
96 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 74.
97 Camus, *The Stranger*, 119.
98 (Ibid., 82)
99 (Ibid., 108)
100 (Ibid., 114)
101 Scherr, "Camus and the Denial of Death: Meursault and Caligula," *Omega*, 173.
102 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 110.
103 Daniel Henke, The Absurdity of Acceptance Through Belief: Meursault's Dismissal of God and the Court System in The Stranger, *Journal of Camus Studies* (2017): 137.
104 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 88.
105 (Ibid., 118)

The *Stranger's* last pages (115-123) elucidate, by means of an emotionally-captivating experience, the shift from persistent negation to the happy Sisyphus at the end of the *Myth*. They begin with Meursault's second violent outburst, this time at the prison chaplain. In the same way that the violent eruption at the end of Part One purged his consciousness of nihilism and catalysed it toward a maturer response to the absurd, so too the outburst near the end of Part Two finally purifies it from all hope, completes the process of negation and drives it toward absurd enlightenment. Herein lies the transforming potential of absurd revolt: though it can never transcend the boundaries of absurdist reality, it does elicit, ironically, the inner power needed to fully accept it.[106] This joyous blind rage washes him clean,[107] preparing him for the final outcome of absurd negation. As it was with the Arab, the chaplain is but a reflection of an inner mode, this time the remaining contradiction that still nested in him. By proving that he is able to disrupt the chaplain's complacency and metaphysical certainty,[108] he can finally attain a complete declaration of a consciousness that has sufficiently integrated to reject any attempt to dissolve the absurdist tension. Indeed, all of a sudden, this apparent ignormus gathers all the fragments of his life and mind into a bold philosophical statement.

But what brings about Meursault's sudden affirmation that everything he has is, truly, everything he desires?[109] The *Stranger's* last pages supply us with an illumined path: at first, the mind that comes to recognize the limits of existence struggles to release itself, yet if instead it fervently negates even the subtlest form of escape, the negation finally places it within the boundaries, enabling one's consciousness to fall into the depths of this life and this universe.

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[106] Slochower ("Camus' The Stranger: The Silent Society and the Ecstasy of Rage," *American Imago,* 293-295) describes well the way these two outbursts shatter the inertia of Meursault's life and make him come alive.
[107] Camus, *The Stranger*, 122.
[108] Henke, The Absurdity of Acceptance Through Belief: Meursault's Dismissal of God and the Court System in The Stranger, *Journal of Camus Studies*, 137.
[109] Skrimshire, "A political theology of the absurd?," *Literature and Theology*, 288.

From within the limits, one can achieve a feeling of the universe from the inside. This in turn causes the universe to awaken its internal powers and sources of light; thus, the dark night becomes "alive with signs and stars."[110]

This is how absurd walls[111] turn into absurd freedom;[112] what superficially appears as a predicament devised by gods, who believed that there could be no greater punishment than futility and eternal repetition,[113] is transformed by the absurd mind into the happiest of all choices. If one is ready to be condemned, one is no longer condemned. Suffering is not Sisyphus' rock but rather his imagination that there could be another life at all.[114] Thus, the absurd mind holds an extraordinary power to find liberty "in the oddest of places - even Oran or Hades" -[115] or prison, for that matter. If, answering Nietzsche's harrowing thought-experiment,[116] it can sanctify that eternal repetition; if indeed the only other life it envisioned were one where it could remember this life,[117] that would finally mend the "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting".[118] The life that was given becomes the life that is chosen, and the mind unifies with the experience.[119]

An uninterrupted awareness of the limit enables human consciousness to be released from its prison while still being in it. In actuality, the more the limits press from all sides, the greater the opportunity for liberation. Limits, tells us the *Stranger*, make us conscious, wake us up to the "Why?", encourage us to overcome nihilism, and lead us to wakefully choose and accept our life.

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110 Camus, *The Stranger*, 122.
111 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 9.
112 (Ibid., 49)
113 (Ibid., 115).
114 (Ibid., 118-119).
115 Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living,* 37-38.
116 Several scholars have identified the imprint of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence in this part of the text. See, for example, Golomb 2005: 130, and Scherr 2014: 182.
117 Camus, *The Stranger*, 120.
118 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 5.
119 This does not relieve the longing altogether, since Sisyphus' rock consists of both the limit and the longing; it is, after all, the very tension itself.

Their presence does not weaken the life-force but rather enhances it, making us "ready to live it all again."[120]

Yet, this relaxation into the limits of human existence also opens a window to a type of experience which is briefly introduced on the last page of both the *Stranger* and the *Myth*. As Meursault calms down after the chaplain's departure, he falls asleep only to wake up with the stars in his face; he is then flooded by the sounds and smells of the earth,[121] and a tide of nature's "wondrous peace" flows through him.[122] While separating from a world that no longer means anything to him, he opens himself to the "gentle indifference of the world"[123] and, with genuine happiness, finds the universe "much like myself - so like a brother, really."[124] Correspondingly, the Myth concludes with a statement that as Sisyphus unites with his limited fate, the godless universe is no longer "sterile nor futile," its now-welcome silence allowing the countless "little voices of the earth" to arise and each atom and mineral flake of his stone and mountain to form a world unto itself.[125] These poetic descriptions indicate that the feeling of the universe from the inside may lead to an absurd form of cosmic union.

Whereas the most fundamental experience of the absurd originates from the rift between consciousness and life,[126] those cosmic perceptions show us that by fully accepting the strangeness - this impenetrable mystery of oneself as well as the universe's -[127] the mind attains an odd kind of intimacy with the world which somewhat heals this essential rift. Both mind and cosmos, knower and known, become, so to speak, brothers in strangeness, bathing in the same

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120 (Ibid., 122).
121 Including "salt air" which stands for sea and unity.
122 Camus, *The Stranger*, 122.
123 (Ibid., 122).
124 (Ibid., 122).
125 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119.
126 (Ibid., 5).
127 (Ibid., 19).

unknowable silent waters.[128] "Making a home in one's homelessness" brings about a revelation that one is tied to creation as much as one remains forever a stranger to it.[129]

This unexpected "harmonious bond" with the universe is uncovered "despite or because of this absurdity".[130] Paradoxically, those who attempt to make the unreasonable world known and familiar, as well as those who strive to transcend it, are the true strangers and outsiders, and thus, Meursault alone is the "one who is actually at home."[131] At the end of the novel, we realize that imposing on oneself the limit of knowing can bring the mind closer to creation and that strangeness does not necessarily mean estrangement. On the contrary, the ones capable of feeling the universe from the inside have the ears to hear the earth's own voice of depth and meaning.

In light of this interpretation, it is easy to observe that the *Stranger* delineates a clear road map of the evolution of the absurd mind. At first, an unformed consciousness meets with the reality of death, the "why?" begins to surface, and it is urged toward a lucid recognition of its predicament. It wrongly resorts to nihilism, which does not even provide a relief. Then it takes upon itself to enter the cosmic cell to confront its limits. In a sincere act of sober humility, it enters an intense process of negation and renunciation - rejecting all hope, all human answers, any release from the tension between longing and fulfillment, and even the worldly pleasures. It constantly shifts between acceptance and revolt, until it attains a climax of revolt which eliminates hope. Finally, this integrated consciousness enters a profound acceptance of limits, realizing that this acceptance liberates it. Now it experiences itself both imprisoned and liberated, separate and unified, alienated and intimate, longing and content. Merging into the paradoxical

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[128] The lyrical meditations of Camus' *Noces* contain similar experiences of unity with nature. For instance: "I felt a small part of that force on which I was drifting, then very much part of it, and finally fused with it" (Quoted from Dunwoodie, *From Noces to L'Etranger,* 150-151).

[129] Skrimshire, "A political theology of the absurd?," *Literature and Theology*, 289.

[130] Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity,* 130.

[131] (Ibid., 130).

nature of the universe itself, it glimpses an absurdist union, a sharing of the unknowable with the cosmos that illumines life from within.

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