Acknowledgements

This article is derived from my BA dissertation, completed in 2020 under the guidance of Prof. Stephen Minta from the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York.

My thesis saw its conception in the summer of 2019 when I travelled to Aix-en-Provence, whose library stores the Fonds Albert Camus. Having gained the authorisation of Mme. Catherine Camus to consult the Camus archives, I stayed in Aix for a few weeks that summer, to then return the following February, just before the lockdowns started all over Europe.

I owe most of my work to Monsieur Vincent Sablayrolles, the archivist who at the time of my visits was responsible for the Camus collection, who took it at heart to make my research possible, even whilst the library was going through a redevelopment and expansion of its locations in February 2020. During my visit at the time, in fact, the Méjanes library had just acquired the new Michel Vovelle site which would host all the library's archival collections. The Camus founds had not yet been moved, so Monsieur Sablayrolles and I sat together in one of the by-then empty reading rooms of the Méjanes, leafing through the manuscript of *L'Étranger*.

I am equally indebted to Mme Aurélie Bosc, the current Director of the Archives, and Monsieur Thomas Duvergé who made my latest visit to the Archives in August 2022 not only possible, but extremely fruitful and enjoyable.

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Estranged from himself? A manuscript-based analysis of Meursault in *L'Étranger*

To walk into the Cité du Livre in Aix-en-Provence, you have to make yourself small, and if you don't, three gigantic book reproductions towering right at the entrance of the Bibliothèque Méjanes would make you, anyway – *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire* and *L'Étranger* by Albert Camus.[1]

It is in fact to the Cité du Livre that Camus' children, Cathrine and Jean, donated a hundred-and-fifty archive boxes and a thousand-and-eight-hundred prints. These present the works of the Franco-Algerian writer, a wide range of related French and foreign criticism, and more than sixty translations of *L'Étranger* and forty of *Le Premier Homme*. This collection of manuscripts, documents, letters, notes, essays, articles and pictures was then implemented by twenty-five archive boxes Olivier Todd brought together while writing his most famous *Albert Camus, Une Vie*, and another fifty belonging to Catherine Camus herself mainly relating to the works' management.[2]

At the time I was conducting my research in Aix, Monsieur Vincent Sablayrolles was the archivist responsible for the Fonds Albert Camus, and he confirmed that the manuscript of *L'Étranger* was still of great interest both among scholars and the general public.

The cover page is dated 1939, whilst on the last one "Mars 1940" is crossed out in favour of "Fev. 1941." It counts 86 sheets in total, carefully numbered by Camus himself on the top right corner, with a significant gap of ten pages encompassing the end of chapter two, chapter

[1] In September 2024, the mayor of Aix-en-Provence announced that this installation, which has been there since 1989, will be moved to somewhere else in Aix (Nelly Assénat, "Les trois grands livres emblématiques de la bibliothèque Méjanes à Aix-en-Provence vont être démontés," *France Bleu Provence*, September 27, 2024)

[2] Marcelle Mahasela, "Faire vivre un fonds, animer un lieu: Le centre de documentation Albert Camus," *Fédération Nationale des Maison d'Écrivain & des Patrimoines Littéraires*, March 27, 2009, https://litterature-lieux.com/up/File/journees/faire-vivre-un-fonds.pdf.

three in its entirety, and the first half of chapter four. The first 14 pages are typewritten and proofread by hand, whilst the following 72 are handwritten.[3]

In the Salle Peiresc, at the heart of the Cité du Livre,[4] Monsieur Sablayrolles hands me the photocopies of the manuscript in batches of ten pages that he then attentively re-counts before handing me the next batch.

Camus writes on plain paper, leaving wide blank margins where arrows, synonyms, conjunctions, entire sentences, notes and circles, cutting through whole paragraphs, finally land, finding space in unconventional layouts (such as written bottom to top). Letters lean to the right, squeezed in between the previous and the following line. When Camus takes out a sentence or cuts a whole paragraph off, he sketches something like an acoustic wave encompassing all the lines, as if he were trying to write a frequency high enough to cover the noise of the neglected paragraph, making its reading almost impossible. Some of his corrections seem to be made as if in prey of a febrile frenzy, covering the dismissed word with a thick black patch. Overall, the novel seems to have been composed following a climax of creative fury: page after page, corrections, additions and erasures increase exponentially, the paper thickens with ink, lines clash with each other, and by the end of it, Camus scrawls words on the page, as if rushing after his own thoughts.

Yet three handwritten pages stick out for being much different from the rest, suggesting they have been rewritten in full and added after the completion of the first draft. In fact, in the manuscript, the murder scene appears twice: the first draft is, like the rest of the novel, numbered and dense with corrections and additions; the rewriting, however, is most likely done on a different kind of paper, free from any corrections, and does not present any page numbers. The text takes the centre of the page instead of being aligned to the left as it has

[3] Albert Camus "L'Étranger – Premier état," 1939-1941, Fonds Albert Camus, Bibliothèque Méjanes, Aix-en-Provence.

[4] At the time of the research, the Fonds Albert Camus were stored in the Méjanes Allumettes library, but in February 2020 the library's archives moved to a new home, the newly acquired Michel-Vovelle site.

been in the previous pages; the handwriting is no longer thick due to the use of a broad tip pen laid dense on the page, but regular, clear; the lines, which generally tend to go upwards towards the end, here follow a straight, horizontal direction. This out-of-the-ordinary, smaller-than-usual handwriting and striking care Camus put into this version of the murder scene is explained by Alice Kaplan as a way to compensate for a shortage of paper brought about by the ongoing occupation of France.[5]

Many scholars have been attracted by the (mis)adventures of the manuscript of *L'Étranger*: in 2016 Alice Kaplan published *Looking for the Stranger: Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic*, "a biography [of the novel], a story of its life,"[6] in which she traces back the evolution of the book, as well as its journeys between Algiers and France and its editorial adventures. A year before, Yosei Matsumoto published an article on the making of *L'Étranger*, based on a parallel reading of the manuscript, Camus' *Carnets* and his correspondence – mainly with Pascal Pia and Jean Grenier, decisive figures for the publication of his first novel and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*.[7]

Whilst the archival documents have been widely employed to reconstruct the novel's editorial history through comparative analysis, the manuscript has not urged near as much close reading. This article takes advantage of this methodological gap to illustrate how reading the manuscript of *L'Étranger* changes and adds to the reception of the novel itself, specifically embarking on a close reading of Meursault. I propose that Camus' traceable linguistic and syntactic changes and corrections are pivotal for the crafting of such an "anomalous" and controversial character.

The first part of this paper looks at how Meursault came into being through tracing back his first appearances in Camus' *Carnets*. I then review selected interpretations and responses the

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[5] Alice Kaplan, *Looking for the Stranger: Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 123-124.
[6] Ibid., 3.
[7] Yosei Matsumoto, "Le processus d'élaboration de *L'Étranger*," *Études Camusiennes: Société Japonaise des Études Camusiennes* 12 (May 2015): 72-86, https://ir.lib.hiroshima u.ac.jp/files/public/3/39180/20160309131238601160/EtudesCamusiennes_12_72.pdf.

protagonist of *L'Étranger* inspired throughout the years, to finally delve into the close reading of the first and final chapters of the manuscript.

What the editors of Camus' *Carnets* and scholars agree on, is that "Récit – l'homme qui ne veut pas se justifier. L'idée qu'on se fait de lui lui est préférée. Il meurt, seul à garder conscience de sa vérité – Vanité de cette consolation," written in April 1937, constututes the first outline of *L'Étranger*.[8] Yosei Matsumoto traces back to August of that same year the moment when "l'écrivain conçoit «la premiere formulation consciente du theme de *L'Étranger*»,"[9] which at the time is set out to be organised around three parts. From this point on, references to Camus' first novel become easily recognisable. However, I would argue Meursault's shy, first appearance dates back to the sixth entry of May 1935, where Camus notes: "Il est à son aise dans la sincérité. Très rare".[10] The sentence has neither subject nor context, but if we consider that Meursault is someone who "refuse de mentir […] [de] dire plus que ce qui est et […] dire plus qu'on ne sent,"[11] this short entry can be interpreted as a primordial sketch of the character.

Overall, notes on secondary characters and events outnumber those describing the protagonist. For instance, in May 1938 Camus already had a precise image of how the burial of Meursault's mother would be like, including the description of a man (Thomas Pérez) who struggles to keep up with the procession and of a nurse wearing a scarf to cover her face disfigured by a cancer; and yet it is only just before December 1938 that he came up with the memorable incipit "aujourd'hui maman est morte," along with other paragraphs which have been transposed into the novel just as they were first drafted.[12] February 1940 marks the birth of two other characters: "le vieux et son chien" (Salamano) and "l'autre et son tic de langage"

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[8] Albert Camus, *Carnets. Mai 1935 – Février 1942* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 46; Kaplan, *Looking for the Stranger*, 29-30.
[9] Matsumoto, "Le processus d'élaboration," 74.
[10] Camus, *Carnets*, 18.
[11] Albert Camus, "Préface à l'édition américaine de *L'Étranger*," in *Albert Camus, Œuvres complètes, I*, ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 1268.
[12] Camus, *Carnets*, 124; 129-130.

(Masson).[13] These are the last notes concerning *L'Étranger* until the first entry of May 1940 announcing that "*L'Étranger* est terminé."[14]

The sheer number of notes on Meursault compared to the other characters and to the novel's structure may hint at an organic birth of the protagonist who comes into being *through* the process of writing, *through* language and therefore *through* the constant, meticulous tweaks of vocabulary and syntax the manuscript reports. Indeed, we *know* little about Meursault: he most probably is a *pied noir*; he lives alone in a first or second floor apartment in Algiers; he works in an office doing a job that does not particularly excite him, yet he does not despise. Free from outright physical, emotional or psychological characterisation, Meursault easily lends himself to become a white slate onto which the readers project their own interpretations and analysis. It then comes as no surprise that Meursault's debut raised a variety responses. Most famously, soon after the novel's release, Jean-Paul Sartre promptly published his "Explication de *L'Étranger*," a parallel reading of Camus' novel and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, addressing the question of how readers are supposed to approach the book's doubtlessly absurd protagonist. Sartre recognised Meursault's "lucidité impitoyable" as a defining characteristic of his, but strictly read him as a representation of the contemporary absurd subject as philosophically unravelled in *Le Mythe*.[15]

On the other side of the Atlantic, reception was of much different ilk, and less concerned with the philosophical implications of the novel: on the book jacket of the first 1946 American edition Meursault is presented as a "helpless," "ordinary, little man;"[16] Eleanor Clark, in her review from the same year, describes him as a "spineless" character whose ultimate "ferocity of determination to live" is barely believable because of the aridity both he and the novel

[13] Camus, *Carnets*, 200.
[14] Ibid., 215.
[15] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Explication de L'Étranger," *Les Caheirs du Sud* (February 1, 1943): 195, https://www.retronews.fr/journal/les-cahiers-du-sud/01-fevrier-1943/717/2001575/75.
[16] Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Knopf, 1946).

express.[17] Two years later, Victor Brombert, off the back of Sartre's "Explication", and therefore grounding his reflections in the French, existentialist spirit of the time, describes Meursault as follows:

> Meursault […] is a weak and passive individual. He is even, one might add, too passive to be convincing. He is afraid of the world and supremely conscious of the futility of his own existence. […] He is afraid of responsibilities and of taking decisions. He is apathetic, taciturn, somewhat slow-witted. This, then, is Meursault, a man who disconcerts rather than exasperates us.[18]

L'Étranger's first appearance took the American public by surprise, betraying perhaps the expectations associated with a first-person narration. This novel does not in fact adhere to the standards of a classical confessional narrative: Clark and Brombert saw Meursault as an inaccessible and impossible-to-sympathise-with character because of his dryness and its reflection on the narrative style;[19] their insistence on how unconvincing the character is, and Brombert's mention of "disconcertion" betray an underlying expectation of a positive development, a growth, perhaps even of a classical heroism that is nowhere to be found in *L'Étranger*, if we seek it in its most conventional sense. The novel did not conform with any literary genre, rather depicted life through the gaze of an absurd man. Possibly, the war and immediate post-war context during which the novel was first published did not favour a positive response since the book highlighted the incoherence of reality, while the public was perhaps looking for a literary work that could inspire a new beginning by giving certainties, rather than further questioning a world whose ethical and moral pillars were already crumbling. It must however be recognised that Clark's harsh critique points nonetheless at the interdependent relationship between Camus' language and Meursault's personality, which is part of the argument of this article.

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[17] E. Clark, "Existentialist Fiction," review of *The Stranger*, by Albert Camus, trans. Stuart Gilbert, *The Kenyon Review* 8, no.4 (Autumn 1946): 676-677.
[18] Victor Brombert, "Camus and the Novel of the 'Absurd,'" *Yale French Studies*, no. 1 (1948): 121, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928869.
[19] Camus' style, which today may be defined minimalist, will then drive Roland Barthes' discussion of "écriture blanche" in *Le Degré Zero de l'Écriture*.

Throughout the years, the hearts of the readership seem, in many ways, to have softened: fifty years from Meursault's first debut, Adele King praised the "banality of much of his experience" alongside "the seemingly 'natural' tone with which he tells his story," which she argues are the features triggering sympathy and even identification in the reader.[20] Within the context of the Anglophone readership, new translation choices have perhaps contributed to this change of heart.[21]

With Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, *L'Étranger* enters the field of postcolonial studies. Said here emphasised the necessity to read this novel in light of the "facts of power which informed and enabled [it]," arguing that Meursault's "conflicted strength" could have emerged solely out of that specific history and community.[22] A postcolonial reading that Peter Dunwoodie harked back to years after, interpreting Meursault as a man who "has not transcended the complacent, immediacy he shares with the European community" resulting in a "physical discomfort" that brings "inattentiveness and confusion" in him, ultimately describing Meursault's actions as an "unselfconscious parading […] of self-satisfied animal banality."[23] Meursault's beastlike attitude had already been brought up a few years before by Harold Bloom who described him as a character "estranged in the world," that Camus reduced to the "status of an irresponsible element of nature," by absolving him from any responsibility in the murder.[24] On the look for eloquence, for heroic action, critics have struggled to accept Meursault's self-explanatory nature, and have then translated it into the banality of an animal merely led by instincts.

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[20] Adele King, "Introduction: After Fifty Years, Still a Stranger," in *Camus's L'Étranger: Fifty Years On*, ed. Adele King (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 3.
[21] Ryan Bloom in his article "Lost in Translation: What the First Line of 'The Stranger' Should Be" in *The New Yorker* (May 11, 2012) points at the change in the opening line form Gilbert's 1946 translation use of "mother," to Matthew Ward's 1988 choice of keeping the French "*maman*" which makes justice to the more affective, even sentimental, French Meursault.
[22] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 161; 185.
[23] Peter Dunwoodie, "From *Noces* to *L'Étranger*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Albert Camus*, ed. Edward J. Hughes (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 159.
[24] Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Albert Camus*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003).

In recent years, the growing interest in medical humanities has inspired further interpretations of Meursault: notable contributions span from Steven Poser's turn-of-the-millennium reading of Camus' protagonist as displaying alexithymia to Sam Shuster's Asperger diagnosis of Meursault. Both articles are deeply grounded in psychiatry and pursue the overreaching aim of *explaining* Meursault's challenges communicating and expressing emotions. These texts have nonetheless sparked the interest of more literary critics such as Jessiah Hahs Brinkley who published a critique of Poser's article in *JCS 2021*, managing both to inscribe his deeply medical approach into a literary framework, and to argue against Poser by claiming that "[Meursault] is not immediately incapable of feelings but rather that perhaps his feelings are not cause enough for action."[25]

Shuster's contribution is driven by the idea that Meursault's diagnosis would prevent further misinterpretations and misunderstandings of his behaviours, language and thoughts[26] and yet a certain irony persists as an aftertaste of such an enterprise that seeks to explain, from a medical perspective, the simplicity of a character that, as we will see through Camus' linguistic and syntactical choices, was carefully calibrated to be measured and uncomplicated. And yet these critical responses, as broad and varied as they may be, even though they offer us readings of the character, they hardly address the question of *who* Meursault is. In this respect, the words of Marcello Mastroianni, Italian cinema idol who interpreted Camus' protagonist in the 1967 adaptation *Lo Straniero* by Italian director Luchino Visconti, give us some crucial insights:

> C'est un homme normal: suffisamment intelligent, suffisamment sensible, pas du tout intellectuel […] et qui aime la vie, qui se promène, qui travaille, qui mange, qui couche avec les femmes, qui boit… C'est tout. Un homme normal. […] Avec peut-être une certaine philosophie méditerranée – n'aime pas se battre pour se

[25] Jessiah Hahs Brinkley, "Meursault, the Absurd and Alexithymia," in *The Journal of Camus Studies 2021*, ed. Peter Francev (Lulu, 2023): 33.
[26] Sam Shuster, "Camus's *L'Étranger* and the first description of a man with Asperger's syndrome," in *Psychology Research and Behaviour Management* 11 (2018): para.11.

> faire comprendre, au fond, parce qu'il fait des choses tellement normales qu'il voit pas pourquoi il doit se forcer à se faire comprendre.[27]

Studying Meursault for the purpose of *becoming* him, facilitates an isolated reading that uproots the protagonist of the novel from the surrounding context of post-war France and its philosophy. We thus get an uncomplicated depiction of "a normal man," "a man who loves life," does normal things, and nourishes an aversion, if not a complete refusal, for convoluted designs and overreading. Clarity and transparency become guiding principles in this novel, and the world of literary theory has often detached itself from this approach betraying, I find, the work and its character's core principle. On the contrary, Mastroianni managed to embrace the simplicity of the protagonist, which gets often mistaken with passive acceptance of the designs of the world, and in this interview, he faithfully conveyed the essence of Meursault by avoiding superfluous explanations, complicated analysis, intellectual, and critical insights into a character who is nothing more than what he feels and how he behaves.

Within this great array of critical responses and interpretations, what can a close reading of the manuscript add to the conversation? I propose that exposure to the rawness of the manuscript gives access to Camus' process of crafting Meursault and illuminates how he organically stems out of the language and linguistic choices the writer makes. Therefore, what kind of changes are there and what do they mean for the construction and development of Meursault?

Fully typed, the first chapter of the manuscript presents some handwritten corrections that then appear in the novel's published version. Some of these are of stylistic ilk and address Jean Grenier's and André Malraux's – the novel's first readers – suggestions of breaking with the monotonous subject-verb-complement structure[28] (on page 10 for example, Camus added

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[27] Marcello Mastroianni, interview by Yves Guy Berges, *Mediaclip*, February 24, 1967. https://mediaclip.ina.fr/fr/i19009092-interview-de-marcello-marstroianni-lors-du-tournage-du-film-l-etranger.html#.

[28] Kaplan, *Looking for the Stranger*, 122-123; Pascal Pia to Albert Camus, May 27, 1941, in *Albert Camus – Pascal Pia, Correspondance 1939-1947*, ed. Yves Marc Ajchenbaum (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 67.

the conjunction "en somme," and later on he turned "le concierge a parlé pendant tout le temps" into "pendant tout ce temps, le concierge a parlé").[29] Other changes are strictly linguistic and lexical: among these, many allow Camus to attain a certain circularity in the narrative, by reproposing the same wording in disparate moments. For instance, when sat in the morgue at the beginning of the story, Meursault describes the "*odeur de nuit* et de fleurs"[30] coming in through the open door, which is the same scent he perceives at the end, in his prison cell, when he says "des *odeurs de nuit*, de terre et de sel rafraichissaient mes tempes."[31] I would argue that it is for this same reason that Camus changed the initial "le soir, dans ce pays, devait être d'une *douceur* mélancolique" into "le soir, dans ce pays, devait être comme une *trêve* mélancolique," a sentence that reappears at the end of the novel – "Là-bas, là-bas aussi, autour de cet asile où des vies s'éteignaient, le soir était comme une *trêve* mélancolique."[32] However, beyond the changes driven by structural and stylistic ambitions, the manuscript presents another set of linguistic and lexical modifications that seem to reflect a need to sharpen Meursault in specific ways: in chapter one, towards the end of the burial scene, Meursault describes how he was "un peu perdu entre le ciel bleu et blanc et la monotonie de ces couleurs, noir gluant du goudron ouvert, noir terne des habits, noir laque de la voiture,"[33] whereas in the manuscript he was "un peu perdu entre le ciel bleu et blanc et *tous ces noirs*."[34] By expanding on "the monotony of black" through describing not only their different shades, but also textures, Camus gifts Meursault with a certain attention to detail that suggests a high sensitivity to the stimuli of the tangible world, instead of the tiresomeness and drowsiness that a word like "monotony" implies.

Similarly, later on, the writer eventually opted for the more vivid description of the "terre couleur du sang" as a replacement for what initially was "la couleur rouge de la terre," thus

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[29] Camus, *L'Étranger*, 11; Camus, "L'Étranger – Premier état," Fonds Albert Camus.
[30] Camus, *L'Étranger*, 18 (my italics).
[31] Ibid., 171 (my italics).
[32] Ibid., 26; 171.
[33] Ibid., 28.
[34] Camus, "L'Étranger – Premier état," Fonds Albert Camus.

quieting his efforts to build Meursault out of a language with as few figures of speech as possible. This image also adds to the "chair blanche de racines" that follows, reinforcing, once again, Meursault's characteristic, deeply sensorial outlook on the world.[35]

But what do these minimal changes mean for Meursault, and what does it say on how Camus wanted to conceive him? The revisions I focused on here not only serve the purpose of a well-crafted novel, but they also direct our attention towards two key features Camus clung to when shaping his protagonist, namely his profoundly sensorial existence and his deeply felt connection to the natural world, which reaches its apex in the last paragraph of the novel.

In line with the climax of frenzy that guided the writing of the whole book, the final lines underwent multiple changes, erasures and additions. Even there, Meursault was still being refined to be a character whose personality proves itself deeply reliant on the writer's language choices. I then want to draw attention to two phrases that the manuscript reveals did not feature in the first draft of the text, but that Camus added in a second instance: "j'ai senti que" and "pour que tout soit consommé, pour que je me sente moins seul".[36]

The "I felt that", three small words that would not make much of a difference in many other contexts, here become the birthplace of "j'avais été heureux, et je l'étais encore," and suddenly make Meursault's epiphany sediment in the body. The rawness of the manuscript directs our attention to a phrase that would have been otherwise overlooked, reinforcing that, regardless of the lyrical tone escalating line after line in the last chapter, Meursault is still a deeply physical, sensual character. In itself, this observation undermines many of criticisms readers moved towards the novel and its protagonist – from the aridity Clark denounced in her review, to the beast-like attitudes that recur from Brombert to Bloom and Dunwoodie, to the most recent medical humanities takes on Meursault, focusing on his inability to feel. Meursault comes out as a man not only capable, but also conscious, of his feelings. It is

[35] Camus, *L'Étranger*, 29.
[36] Camus, "L'Étranger – Premier état," Fonds Albert Camus.

however a way of feeling that is simultaneously corporeal – in that it takes place in the tangible reality of a body that feels, in response to the reality outside – and philosophical, as it involves notions of truth, conscience and death.

Camus' first outline of *L'Étranger* from August 1937, presented a novel divided into three parts, the third consisting of "l'abandon des compromis et la verité dans la nature."[37] This is an argument present in many of the short stories contained in *Noces*. For instance, in "Noces à Tipasa" he wrote "quand je me jetterai dans les absinthes pour me faire entrer leur parfum dans le corps, j'aurais conscience […] d'accomplir une verité qui est celle du soleil et sera aussi celle de ma mort."[38] Similarly, the interrelation of truth, death and nature resonates in the last paragraphs of *L'Étranger* when Meursault says: "Mais j'étais sûr de moi, sûr de tout, plus sûr que lui, sûr de ma vie et de cette mort qui allait venir. Oui, je n'avais que cela. Mais du moins, je tenais cette vérité autant qu'elle me tenait."[39] In both cases, "truth" is attained through the rejection of religious transcendence – the additional element of tension present in the novel in the form of "lui" (the priest) – and full, conscious acceptance of one's own mortality. Going back to Camus' *Carnets*, the entry preceding the first outline of the *L'Étranger* adds to this idea and anticipates the conclusion of the novel:

> Il s'enfonçait tous les jours dans la montagne et en revenait muet […] Il arrivait à se faire semblable à ces nuages ronds et blancs derrière l'unique sapin qui se détachait sur une crête, semblable à ces champs d'épilobes rosâtres, de sorbiers et de campanules. Il s'intégrait à ce monde aromatique et rocheux. Parvenu au lointain sommet, devant le paysage immense soudain découvert, ce n'était pas l'apaisement de l'amour qui naissait en lui, mais une sorte de *pacte intérieur* qu'il concluait avec cette *nature étrangère*, la *trêve* qui s'établit entre deux visages durs et farouches, l'intimité de deux adversaires et non l'abandon de deux amis.[40]

Here, the merging with the surrounding environment recalls Meursault waking up with stars on his face, welcoming "la merveilleuse paix de cet été endormi" entering him like a tide. At the end of the paragraph, we encounter again the "trêve," that Camus employed twice in

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[37] Camus, *Carnets*, 62.
[38] Camus, *Noces Suivi de L'Été* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 16.
[39] Camus, *L'Etranger*, 169-170.
[40] Camus, *Carnets*, 60-61.

L'Étranger, and that here comes in the form of an agreement between man and the natural world, a kind of surrendering to it.

We can thus follow a thread of how the body, the sensorial knowledge of corporeality, allows Camus in *Noces* and Meursault in *L'Étranger* to access the transcendent immanence of communion with nature, in the first case attaining his "jour de noces avec le monde,"[41] and in the second opening himself to "tendre indifference du monde."[42]

Insisting on the importance of the addition of "j'ai senti que" allows to read *L'Étranger* against *Noces* so to understand where Meursault's attitude to life comes from. What Mastroianni picked up on in his description of Meursault – his embracing a Mediterranean philosophy of life – is supported by Camus' own take on Mediterranean living as described in *Noces*, which is based on "le culte et l'admiration du corps," as Meursault leads the same life as the young Algerians whose existences "n[e sont] pas à construire mais à burler."[43] In fact, Meursault recounts his experiences on the basis of the physical sensations he gets; his scale of values is his own body and the responses it produces. What happens during the scene with the priest is precisely the clash between two different ways of perceiving life : on the one side, a man who comes out of a belief where the body should be mortified in order to elevate the spirit, a belief that holds the body as a means to sin, and on the other side Meursault, for whom the physical is his gate to access the world, a man who decodes and interprets it through bodily sensations, overall, a man who is proud of his humanness, just like Camus was when he wrote that "si, il y a de quoi [être fier]: ce soleil, cette mer, mon cœur bondissant de jeunesse, mon *corps* au goût de sel."[44] This is what encourages Meursault to be always present in the moment, and it is something that Camus conveys through small details.

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[41] Camus, *Noces*, 17; 20.
[42] Camus, *L'Étranger*, 171-172.
[43] Camus, *Noces*, 45; 42.
[44] Ibid., 16 (my italics).

In some way, Camus anticipated the difficulties readers would have to understand and accept Meursault, both as a plausible character and as a plausible man: *à propos* of the Algerian way of life, Camus wrote "J'entends bien qu'un tel peuple ne peut être accepté de tous. Ici, l'intelligence n'a pas de place comme en Italie. Cette race est indifférente à l'esprit."[45] In fact, possibly influenced by Sartre's existentialism and his "Explication de *L'Étranger*", critics have dwelled upon the novel's take on human existence. Thomas Hannah argued that *L'Étranger* rejected all eternal values and that it successfully depicted the "meaninglessness and indeterminacy of human life,"[46] conveyed both by the killing of the Arab and by Meursault's death sentence. In this regard, Sartre compared Camus' style and Meursault's attitude towards existence:

> Le réel apparait sans être amené et disparait sans être détruit, le monde s'effondre et renait à chaque pulsation temporelle. […]
> Toutes les phrases de son livre sont équivalentes, comme sont équivalentes toutes les expériences de l'homme absurde; chacune se pose pour elle-même et rejette les autres dans le néant; mais […] aucune ne se détache sur le fond des autres.[47]

By way of a stylistic analysis, he argued that Camus' choice of the *parfait composé* turned every sentence into an island, much alike Meursault's experience, as they are both arranged by mere juxtaposition. Ultimately, Camus' formal choices mirror the Meursault's behaviours. Sartre's stance has been reproposed by Victor Brombert who argued that in a godless world like Meursault's, where all values disappear,

> all experiences become equivalent and are to be measured quantitatively. To smoke a cigarette or to kill a man, to desire a woman or to gobble a meal, amount to the same thing. All these actions have the same value or lack of it, for all are equally devoid of real significance.[48]

I find that these responses do not take into account Camus' reflections on the hunger, and perhaps greediness, for life he advanced in *Noces*, and consequently overlook the strongly

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[45] Camus, *Noces*, 45.
[46] Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago: Henry Regenry Co., 1958), 44; 48.
[47] Sartre, "Explication de *L'Étranger*," 204-205.
[48] Brombert, "Camus and the Novel of the 'Absurd,'" 120.

sensorial and corporeal way through which Meursault lives – in a way, they ignore the "J'ai senti que," and turn the character into an insensitive, beast-like figure, consequently overlooking the intensity of feeling of Meursault. Overall, there appears to be a flattening of the protagonist's experiences that Hanna translates into the meaninglessness of life, and Brombert into the insignificance of it. On the contrary, Sartre's more subtle interpretation points at a continuous alternation of "destruction" and "rebirth," as if suggesting not that all experiences are equal to him, but that each experience is an end to itself, somewhat aligning to Sartre's claim that the presence of death reduces our existence to a series of present moments.[49] And yet, this is not enough of a reason for Meursault to undermine the importance of the small, and often casual episodes that make up our lives, as he tells us that even when confronted with the vastness and indifference of the world, they are still worth living.

On the other hand, what the novel conveys is the equivalence of existences. As Meursault stated when his boss offered him to relocate to Paris, "on ne chang[e] jamais de vie, en tout cas toutes se val[ent]."[50] There are echoes of this concept in the final pages too, when he realises that "le chien de Salamano valait autant que sa femme. La petite femme automatique était aussi coupable que la Parisienne que Masson avait épousée ou que Marie qui avait envie que je l'épouse."[51] This sentence has been interpreted as the character's final epiphany realising the insignificance of his existence – of anyone's existence – in the face of the absurdity of life. Nonetheless, this should not be read as a diminishing of the value of individual experiences, these "bonheurs faciles"[52] embraced in full awareness that Meursault lives for, and that support him throughout his prison days.

It is in fact in the last paragraphs of *L'Étranger* that Meursault confirms himself a deeply grounded – as in immanent – character who fully rejects any movement of transcendence. Not

[49] Sartre, "Explication de *L'Étranger*," 203.
[50] Camus, *L'Étranger*, 64.
[51] Ibid., 170.
[52] Camus, *Noces*, 41.

only, but Camus also elevates him to "le seul Christ que nous méritons,"[53] through a sentence that the manuscript indicates was an addition to the first draft: if at first, the story would have closed with "j'avais été heureux et je l'étais encore. Il me restait à souhaiter qu'il y ait…," Camus then rewrote it and added "pour que tout soit consommé, pour que je me sente moins seul." What now is regarded as a primordial interpretation of the figure of Meursault is based on Camus' 1955 preface to the American edition where he explains that the protagonist is the only Christ we deserve, and in the novel it finds support in the judge calling Meursault "Monsieur l'Antéchrist," and in the character's sentence "pour que tout soit consommé," recalling Jesus' "consummatum est."[54] It would not be unreasonable to speculate that this addition dates back to March 1940 when, just before moving to Paris, Camus noted in his *Carnets* "À l'aube des temps modernes: Tout est consommé? D'accord, alors commençons de vivre."[55] This entry, in fact, encompasses both the image of total exhaustion that Meursault conveys through the expression "purgé du mal, vidé d'espoir," and the consequent rebirth that the character evokes in "Il m'a semblé que je comprenais pourquoi […] [maman] avait joué à recommencer."[56] It could then be argued Meursault was not conceived as a sacrificed Christ of the post-God world to start with, but that this is a metaphor that came to be through Camus' writing process. However, it is a symbol that persisted in the aftermath of the novel, both in the critical responses it inspired, but mainly it appears to be a guiding theme of Camus' opera adaptation of the novel. If we look at the closing lines of the libretto, we see how it profoundly relies on the juxtaposition of Christ and Meursault, making the symbolism much more explicit than how it is in the novel:

> *Les bras en croix* […]
> [Et j'étais content] de m'ouvrir à la tendre indifférence du monde. Ô terre, terre fraternelle, Ô bonheur d'être et de devoir mourir!

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[53] Camus, "Préface à l'édition américaine," 1269.
[54] Ioannes [John], 19:30 (Biblia Sacra Vulgata).
[55] Camus, *Carnets*, 205.
[56] Camus, *L'Étranger*, 171.

Rideau[57]

Here, Camus elevated Meursault's martyrdom through the stage directions, whilst also turning the character's moment of liberation into a more lyrical scene, charged with spirituality by employing a double invocation – of nature and of happiness in life as well as in death. What these closing lines successfully convey is both Meursault's sacrifice and his devotion, on an imaginary cross, to the tangible, sensorial world (O world, o brotherly world) and mortal life (O happiness of being, and of having to die), as a praise for immanence despite death.

The presence of a text that is in many ways the aftermath of *L'Étranger*, highlights the themes and topics that the writer deemed pivotal in the narrative, as they are carried on into the opera adaptation. These are Meursault as a Christ-like figure, his sense of communion with nature, and his enduring happiness in face of both the "tender indifference of the world," and his impending death, enabled by a persistent and unshakable "prise de conscience," which Camus believed to be the primary condition to achieve durable happiness.[58]

Far from being an exhaustive piece, this article has attempted to open a window on the manuscript of *L'Étranger*. Having uncovered how few notes delineating Meursault are there in the writer's *Carnets*, and by way of emphasising the interrelation between the character and Camus' meticulous language and linguistic quest, I have tried to show how the protagonist of *L'Étranger* is a character that organically takes shape as the novel is being written. This research has focused on Meursault because of my fascination with the span of responses and criticisms such a character has attracted, but the possibilities that the manuscript itself and the *Fond Albert Camus* offer are endless.

"*L'Étranger* narrates a cruel and bitter experience, yet deeply authentic, and this is what makes it moving," wrote Italian writer Alberto Moravia to Camus in a personal letter,[59] and

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[57] Albert Camus, "L'Étranger – Adaptation pour l'opéra," n.d., Fonds Albert Camus.
[58] Albert Camus to Jean Grenier, June 18, 1938, in *Albert Camus – Jean Grenier, Correspondance 1932-1960*, ed. Marguerite Dobrenn (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 30.
[59] Alberto Moravia, letter to Albert Camus, Oct 20, 1957, my English translation. Fonds Albert Camus.

this article wants to echo this feeling, renewing the fascination that such a profound yet simple story, deprived of any artificiality, instils in its readers. In his being painstakingly present within his corporeal reality and within the world, Meursault gives voice to feelings and sensations that are part of our everyday life, and somewhat manages to relieve us from the overwhelming complexity of the world that often strikes us. The novel reminds us that life happens and does not ask for explanations nor gives any. Life happens and we shall let it happen, engaging, as much as we can, in the building of a world which is worth living. In Camus' words:

> Mon rôle je le reconnais, n'est pas de transformer le monde, ni l'homme. Je n'ai pas assez de vertus, ni de lumières pour cela. Mais il est, peut-être, de servir à ma place, les quelques valeurs sans lesquels un monde même transformé, ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécu, sans lesquels un homme, même nouveau, ne vaudra pas d'être respecté.[60]

[60] Vincent Duclert, *Camus, Des Pays de Liberté* (Stock, 2020), 183.

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