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Grace, Play, and the Body in the Writings of Albert Camus

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Introduction

The French-Algerian writer Albert Camus is most often associated with the philosophy of the absurd. He dedicated a book-length essay, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* [*The Myth of Sisyphus*] (1942), to this subject, as well as numerous plays and novels. But, while Camus may be best known for his ideas on the absurd, there is another prominent idea running through his novels, essays, and plays. This is the idea of grace.¹

Grace and the absurd indicate two different relationships that one can have with the surrounding world. While the absurd “est essentiellement un divorce” [is essentially a divorce] (48 LMDS)² between a person and the surrounding world, grace signifies a union between a person and the world. Thus, the absurd and grace are two sides of the same coin. They both concern human beings and the world around them, but they indicate two differing relationships: the absurd indicates a separation; grace represents a marriage.

In particular, grace and the absurd are not just about humans in the world, but human *bodies* in the world. When Camus writes about the absurd in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, he says that it is “le seul lien qui les unisse” [the only link that unites them] (48). In this way, the absurd indicates the divorce between a person and the world

¹It is important to note here that Camus never formally defines grace as he does with the absurd. Instead, I have decided on the term “grace” to represent a current of thought that I see running parallel to the absurd in the work of Camus. This terminology will be explained later in the essay.

² All translations are my own. However, I have consulted the English versions of Camus’ texts for reference. For *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, I am using Justin O’Brien’s 1955 translation.

while also uniting him or her *through this divorce*. The same argument could be made about the body. It is through the body that one interacts with the world and experiences the world. At the same time, it is also the body that cuts one off from the world and serves as a barrier between one's inner self and the exterior world. In this way, the absurd acts as a metaphor for the body. The paradox of the absurd is also the paradox of the body.

Grace allows one to escape this paradox. Here, I am referring to grace in terms of physical, bodily grace – not religious grace. This is how I will refer to grace throughout the essay. When one appears physically graceful, this indicates the union between a person and his/her surroundings, but not in the way of the absurd that unites a body and its environment through a divorce. Instead, when one is in a state of grace one feels as if one is both a body and the environment at the same time. This is contrary to the absurd, where one is hyper-conscious of one's body as dividing oneself from the world (while at the same time resigning oneself to the fact that it is the only way to experience the world). With grace, one identifies so strongly with one's body that it can seem as if the body is effaced. This is a different type of paradox: one feels as if one *is* a body, but this same body also erases itself. In effect, this can occur because one is not conscious with one's mind of having a body. Instead, one feels as if one *is* a body, and thus one also feels as if one is the surrounding world. This is because the body is still the medium through which one interacts with the world. Thus, if one is a body, one must also be everything with which the body interacts.

In this essay, I will be exploring the connections among the body, grace, and the absurd in two of Camus' earliest essays: "Noces à Tipasa" [Nuptials at Tipasa] (1938)³ and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. This will then culminate in a discussion on "play," which ties all three subjects together. Finally, these topics will be explored in Camus' novel *La Peste* [*The Plague*] to show how one might apply the findings of this essay to Camus' fiction. To begin, I will focus on the foregrounding of the body in Camus' two essays. I will then show how Camus' emphasis on the body leads him to explore either the state of grace or the absurd. After this, I will show that while grace and the absurd appear to be opposites, there is still the possibility for them to coexist. This is done in the realm of play. Here, I am referring to the sociological understanding of play, which I will develop later on in the essay and relate to the absurd. As we will see, play is the primary way that one can become graceful, and following the absurd to its conclusion is equivalent to turning life into a game that one must play. In this way, being conscious of and loyal to the absurd turns life into a playing field where one may be in a state of grace.

The Body Leading to the Absurd

In the first section of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus writes about how he can only know himself and the world through his sensory perception. In what Abraham Sagi calls an "empirical datum" (63), Camus passionately exclaims: "De qui et de

³ This short essay is part of the larger collection *Noces* [*Nuptials*]. In lieu of broadly treating the entire collection, I have chosen to examine this one essay in depth with the understanding that it is representative of the entire collection.

quoi en effet puis-je dire : 'Je connais cela !' Ce cœur en moi, je puis l'éprouver et je juge qu'il existe. Ce monde, je puis le toucher et je juge encore qu'il existe. Là s'arrête toute ma science et le reste est construction" [In reality, of whom and of what can I say: 'I know that!' This heart inside me, I can feel it and I judge that it exists. This world, I can touch it and I judge that it exists. All of my science stops there and the rest is construction] (34). In this passage, Camus affirms the knowledge of his physical senses above all other types of knowing. He can "juge[r]" [judge] that his heart exists simply because he can "éprouver" [feel] it beating within him. In the same way, he can "toucher" [touch] the world around him and thus know that it exists. In both cases, he must feel or touch before he can draw a conclusion. Thus, Camus acts empirically, trusting his sensory experiences to provide information about himself and the world.

Camus further emphasizes this when he writes, "voici encore des arbres et je connais leur rugueux, de l'eau et j'éprouve sa saveur. Ces parfums d'herbe et d'étoiles, la nuit, certains soirs où le coeur se détend, comment nierai-je ce monde dont j'éprouve la puissance et les forces?" [here again are trees and I know their roughness, water and I feel its taste. These smells of grass and stars, the night, certain nights where the heart floats away, how will I deny this world of which I feel its power and its forces?] (35). In this passage, Camus once again affirms the power of his physical senses as a way to know the world. He knows that trees are trees by feeling their roughness, and he verifies that what he is drinking is water because he can taste it. He then smells the grass around him, and asks rhetorically how he could possibly deny the existence of the world when he can feel its power. Here, the power

of the world is understood to be its physical reality – the rough tree bark one can feel by touch, the taste of refreshing water, and the smell of grass. For Camus, the fact that he can experience these things through his senses justifies their existence.

Later on in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus summarizes this epistemological position by stating that “ce que je touche, ce qui me résiste, voilà ce que je comprends” [what I touch, what resists me, that is what I understand] (73). Once again, Camus notes that it is by way of his physical senses, this time his sense of touch, that he understands the world. Anything that goes beyond this realm of the physical body is unknowable. Indeed, Camus wonders “que signifie pour moi une signification hors de ma condition?” [what does a signification outside of my condition mean for me?] (73). For Camus, if something is not immediately relatable to the human condition, it is unknowable. Here, the human condition signifies one’s existence as a physical, mortal body. Since one can only know through one’s physical senses, this limits the human condition to the realm of the body. Because of this, Camus “ne [peut] comprendre qu’en termes humains” (73) [can only understand in human terms]. Everything, including philosophical problems about the nature of truth, justice, and existence, must be framed in terms of the human and the physical to be of relevance to Camus.

By basing his knowledge around the body and his senses, Camus is essentially acting as an empirical thinker. Thinking empirically allows one to interact with the world through one’s senses, but it also implies something else as well. It implies that one must be an independent observer, distanced and cut off from the surrounding world. In this way, one uses one’s senses to understand the

world, but remains at a distance from it, too. From this description, it is clear that empiricism has the same relationship to the body as the absurd does. In both cases, the body is the vehicle that one uses to interact with the world. In addition, one is conscious of having a body that serves as both the barrier and the link between oneself and the world; in other words, one is conscious of the division between subject and object. This division is a requirement for empirical thinking, because it creates an object of study that is distinct from the observer.

In keeping with this empirical mode of reasoning, Camus notes that no other truths can be accepted except those that are realized because of the body. Indeed, he wonders, “quelle autre vérité puis-je reconnaître sans mentir, sans faire intervenir un espoir que je n’ai pas” [what other truth can I recognize without lying, without introducing a hope that I don’t have] (74). To acknowledge other truths would be to lie, because these truths would be based on hope. And hope is impossible for Camus since it is always based on a future that the body denies. Whenever Camus writes about hope, it is in contrast to one’s own mortal condition. For example, he notes that hope is an “*élision mortelle*” [mortal dodge] (21) because it is “*espoir d’une autre vie*” [hope of another life] (21). Hope escapes the human condition because it denies the physical reality of death, and thus also denies the idea that the world ultimately rejects all meaning one attempts to create. Because of this, for Camus hope “*ne signifie rien dans les limites de ma condition*” [signifies nothing in the limits of my condition] (74). This is noted as well by Herbert Hochberg, who describes the distinction between the physical world and the idea of meaning for Camus. To Hochberg, “Camus is...an empiricist” (90) because he agrees that one

cannot apply meaning to the physical world, since the meaning would have to come from outside of the physical world. Thus, although one can know the physical world, it will ultimately be a world that is meaningless.

In this way, truths derived from the body are ultimately useless when it comes to the question of meaning in the world. Empirical evidence can relate facts about the physical world, but nothing more. Thus, Camus' empiricism shows just how little one can really know about the world. As he says himself, "là s'arrête toute ma science et le reste est construction" [all of my science stops there and the rest is construction] (34). Indeed, even when Camus writes that "ce coeur en moi, je puis l'éprouver et je juge qu'il existe" [this heart in me, I can feel it and I judge that it exists] (34), he then goes on to say that "ce coeur même qui est le mien me restera à jamais indéfinissable" [even this heart which is mine will always remain indefinable to me] (34). While he can physically feel his heartbeat and thus know that it exists, Camus cannot give any sense or meaning to the fact that he has a heart. To do this would be to go beyond the realm of the physical and into the realm of language, and thus also to go into the realm of uncertainty.⁴ Because of this, Camus writes that one must "choisir entre une description qui est certaine, mais qui ne m'apprend rien, et des hypothèses qui prétendent enseigner, mais qui ne sont point certaines" [choose between a description that is certain, but that doesn't teach me anything, and

⁴ Camus seems suspicious of spoken language, perhaps because although it emanates from the physical body, to convey its meaning it must leave the physical body. Thus, it is unstable. In contrast to speech, Camus positively emphasizes the silence of nature (see "Le Vent à Djemila" [The Wind at Djemila] in *Noces*) and the silence of his mother. Silence seems to be a way to get closer to the world, whereas language distances oneself from the world. See Miranda Thomas' article "Speechless Eloquence in Camus' *L'exil Et Le Royaume*" to explore further.

hypotheses that pretend to teach, but that are uncertain] (36). Here, the certain description that is meaningless can be understood to be empirical, physical facts, while the uncertain hypotheses are the meaning that one puts onto these facts. Because of this impossible situation, Camus feels that he is an “étranger à moi-même et à ce monde” [stranger to myself and to this world] (36).

He is a stranger to himself and to the world because he is both confined to the physical world and cut off from any possible meaning. As someone who thinks more or less empirically, Camus must only take his knowledge from his physical senses, but he must remain at a distance from these senses as well. This situation is described by Camus in his well known example of the image of a man in a telephone booth: “Un homme parle au téléphone derrière une cloison vitrée, on ne l’entend pas, mais on voit sa mimique sans portée: on se demande pourquoi il vit” [A man is speaking on the telephone behind a glass wall, we cannot hear him, but we see his meaningless mimicry: we ask ourselves why he lives] (29). In this example, the stark reality of a physical world devoid of meaning is foregrounded by the fact that the significance of the man’s bodily movements is unknowable. Since his voice cannot be heard, his actions appear arbitrary and his physical gestures have no meaning. He appears completely out of place and cut off from the surrounding world. For Camus, this is the absurd condition of all humans, although one may forget this in the course of daily life. However, in the image of someone speaking in a telephone booth, Camus sees an image that reminds one of the absurd human condition. Indeed, Camus goes on to define the absurd as an “étrangeté du monde” [strangeness of the world] (29) and that the image of a man in a telephone booth is

“l’absurde” [the absurd] (29) as well. Thus, the absurd arises from one’s physical presence in the world – one must live as a physical body to interact with the world, but this very condition excludes one from any meaning as that meaning would have to come from outside the physical world.

The Body Leading to Grace

Camus’ understanding of the absurd is the culmination of his empirical reasoning that posits the importance of the physical body. However, there is the possibility of another type of interaction with the world that can arise from the physical body. In fact, Camus mentions it in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Directly after noting the ultimate meaninglessness of a type of thought based on hope, Camus proposes a way that the world could have meaning, and he does this without making an appeal beyond the physical world. He says that “si j’étais arbre parmi les arbres, chat parmi les animaux, cette vie aurait un sens ou plutôt ce problème n’en aurait point car je ferais partie de ce monde. Je *serais* ce monde auquel je m’oppose maintenant” [If I was a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning – or rather, this problem wouldn’t have a meaning because I would be part of this world. I *would be* this world against which I oppose myself right now] (74). In this passage, Camus departs from his position of the empirical, objective observer. Here, he enters into the world to become part of it. Because of this, there is no longer a distinction between subject and object – Camus is the world and the world is he. This is why he puts “serais” [would be] in italics, indicating the union between

himself and his surroundings. Of course, this whole passage is a hypothesis – Camus’ use of the hypothetical “si” [if] and the conditional tense of the verb “être” [to be] indicate that the possibility of being one with the world is mere fantasy. Indeed, Camus’ awareness of the absurd and of the fundamental indifference of the world prevents this union. Nevertheless, this passage indicates that there is, perhaps, another way of interacting with the world. In addition, it shows that through one’s body, one can find meaning in the physical world, or at least banish the problem of meaning. This is the type of thinking that Camus develops in “Noces à Tipasa.”

“Noces à Tipasa” is quite different in form and content from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Whereas *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* is a critical, philosophical essay exploring the absurd and its consequences, “Noces à Tipasa” is not written in a philosophical way. Instead, it is a personal, autobiographical essay recounting some of Camus’ experiences in Algeria. Camus tells of the pleasures and joys of this Mediterranean world, evidently for no other reason than because he enjoys doing so. There does not appear to be a higher philosophical purpose that will serve as the end result of this essay. However, there are similarities between “Noces à Tipasa” and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. For example, in both essays, Camus foregrounds the body as a vehicle of knowledge. But, since he is emphasizing the union between his body and the world in “Noces à Tipasa”, he does not write from an empirical epistemological point of view. Instead, Camus writes from an epistemological position that could be described as *sensualist*. This argument is put forth by Jean-Philippe Deranty, who notes that “‘sensualism’ ...does not refer to an empiricist epistemological position premised upon a dualistic division between subject and object. Rather the sensualist

strand...starts from the premise of the immanent unity of the subjective and the objective poles” (515). This unity between subject (human being) and object (the surrounding world) is possible because of an “experience of opening or ‘openness’, an opening to the world” (518). One does not distinguish oneself from the world in order to know it; instead, one enters into the world to understand it. In this way, one can also know oneself, as the mixing of subject and object indicates that knowing one pole is knowing them both. This is in contrast to Camus’ distinction between himself and the world in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, which caused him to be both a stranger to the world and to himself.

One way Camus arrives at a sensual understanding of the world is by depersonalizing the body. In this way, he banishes identity so that the physical body can interact more readily with the world. As Deranty notes, in “Noces à Tipasa” Camus often “depersonalizes the depiction of bodily experiences by avoiding the use of pronouns and adjectives that would denote the first person perspective” (522). Another author who notes this is Anthony Rizzuto, who writes in his book *Camus: Love and Sexuality* that for Camus, “the dissolution of human personality” is necessary in order to “synchronize [the] body with a deeply felt harmony” (8). In other words, by depersonalizing his body, Camus can then enter into the world in a sensualist way, as Deranty would say.

One example of this can be found in the first paragraph of *Noces à Tipasa*, when Camus writes “les yeux tentent vainement de saisir autre chose que des gouttes de lumière et des couleurs qui tremblent au bord des cils. L’odeur volumineuse des plantes aromatiques racle la gorge et suffoque dans la chaleur

énorme” [eyes try vainly to capture anything other than drops of sun and colors that tremble on eyelids. The voluminous odor of aromatic plants scrapes the throat and suffocates in the enormous heat] (13-14)⁵. In this passage, Camus is describing the physical world, just as he does in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* when he writes that “ce monde, je puis le toucher et je juge encore qu’il existe” (34) [this world, I can touch it and I judge again that it exists]. However, whereas he emphasizes himself and his distinct point of view by using “je” [I] in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, here he writes “les yeux” [the eyes] to describe what he sees, as opposed to writing something like “je vois” [I see]. In addition, he notes that the smell of plants scrapes “la gorge” [the throat.] Whose throat is he speaking of here? It is unclear. Granted, in French, body parts are referred to in this impersonal way; however, nowhere prior to this description does Camus indicate who is speaking. Thus, it still seems strange, as there is no subject for the throat to refer to. Because of this method of depersonalization, Camus is not distinct and distanced from the world around him. Instead, he is beginning to merge with the world. Indeed, the light and colors of the landscape “tremblent au bord des cils” [tremble on eyelids]. It is as if what Camus is seeing will enter into him, as the image of the landscape is pasted onto his very eyes. The world is no longer something to be observed at a distance, but is now right in front of him, pressing up against his body. In the same way, he feels suffocated by the heat of the day. The heat is overpowering him, entering into his throat and threatening to override his individual agency.

⁵ For all the essays from *Noces* I am using Ellen Conroy Kennedy’s translations as a reference, which are found in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*.

When Camus does identify that it is indeed him who is speaking at the end of this paragraph, he writes “à peine, au fond du paysage, puis-je voir la masse noire du Chenoua” [I can hardly see the black mass of the Chenoua at the back of the landscape] (14)⁶. As soon as Camus identifies himself, the world becomes distant again. He can see the Chenou “à peine” [hardly] and it is “au fond” [at the back] of the landscape. In this way, Camus creates a distinct relationship between his individual self and the world around him. When he is depersonalized, he acts in a sensualist way in that he is so close to the world that he might merge with it. On the other hand, when he delineates himself as an individual, he interacts with the world at a distance. Just as in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, when he describes himself as a “je” [I], he feels cut off from the world around him.

A few pages later, Camus returns to the depersonalized style of description. He exclaims “que d’heures passées à écraser les absinthes, à caresser les ruines” [so many hours spent crushing absinthe plants, caressing ruins]. In this passage, Camus once again effaces himself as a subject when writing about his interaction with the world. He is crushing absinthe plants and caressing ruins, but he is not stating that it is he who is doing these things. Deranty notes that Camus uses these “impersonal expressions” (523) to show “the abandonment of the reference to a centre of experience” (523). Indeed, it seems that Camus is beginning to identify with the plants and the ruins in this passage, as he is not identifying his body or his senses. In other words, Camus is not an individual subject who then crushes absinthe plants or caresses ruins. Instead, as is indicated by his description, Camus is the actual

⁶ The Chenoua is a mountain range in Algeria.

crushing and the caressing. In this way, he is actually identifying *with* his senses and becoming his senses.

In this fashion, Camus can arrive at a state of grace by interacting with the world in a sensualist way. This is in contrast to his empirical mode of reasoning in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, which led to him interacting with the world in an absurd way. But, what exactly is grace? In my definition, it is not theological grace, but bodily grace. Bodily grace is when a body appears to be at one with its surroundings. For this to occur, the body must become distanced from the mind in order to commune with the world. This is very similar to sensualism, and in fact represents the end point of this type of thinking. Working from a sensualist point of view, one can depersonalize his/her body (distance the mind from the body) to open him/herself and interact with the world. By doing this, one achieves a state of grace, which is the appearance of a graceful body that is in perfect harmony with the environment. Thus, if one starts from a sensualist point of view, one will end up in a state of grace. This understanding of the body runs both parallel and counter to the way the body is understood in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: parallel in that both start from an epistemological position based on the body to arrive at a state of being, and counter in that the two states of being are opposites.

I have formulated this definition of grace based on two authors who use this term, Hans Gumbrecht and David Foster Wallace. Gumbrecht writes about grace in his book *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, and cites graceful bodies as one of the main attractions of watching sport. Wallace invokes grace in a New York Times article from 2006 entitled "Federer as Religious Experience," and provides the specific

example of tennis player Roger Federer as a graceful athlete. For Gumbrecht, a “display [of grace] may represent the return of human bodies to a state of nature, redeemed from dependence on the mind and brain for survival” (171). In this way, Gumbrecht notes that bodies make one aware of one’s existence as a sensual, physical being. In representing a possible return to a “state of nature”, graceful bodies show that human beings are not just (if at all) rational minds trapped inside a restrictive body. Instead, humans can learn, experience, and grow through the body just as they can through the mind. In other words, physical sensations and experiences can guide one to knowledge just as reason can. Wallace says something very similar in writing about sport, when he notes that:

High-level sports are a prime venue for the expression of human beauty...The human beauty we’re talking about here is beauty of a particular type; it might be called kinetic beauty. Its power and appeal are universal. It has nothing to do with sex or cultural norms. What it seems to have to do with, really, is human beings’ reconciliation with the fact of having a body. Of course, in men’s sports no one ever talks about beauty or grace or the body.

Here Wallace is technically talking about beauty, but he is using this term in much the same way that Gumbrecht uses grace, a fact indicated by the final sentence where Wallace uses the two terms interchangeably. When Wallace writes that this beauty (or grace) that is expressed by bodies in sport is a “reconciliation with the fact of having a body”, he is echoing Gumbrecht’s notion of grace as “the return of human bodies to a state of nature.”

In “Noces à Tipasa,” Camus also writes about his body as returning to a state of nature; or, in other words, as rediscovering its true nature. Camus summarizes his experience at Tipasa by writing that “ce n’est pas si facile de devenir ce qu’on est, de retrouver sa mesure profonde. Mais... je m’intégrais et je m’accomplissais” [it is not easy to become what one is, to rediscover one’s profound measure. But...I integrated myself and I accomplished myself] (17). In writing that he “[s]’intégrai[t]” [integrated himself] and “[s]’accomplissai[t]” [accomplished himself], Camus’ language recalls Wallace’s use of “reconciled.” Camus also indicates that he “dev[ient] ce qu’[il] est” [becomes what he is and rediscovers his “mesure profonde” [profound measure]]. In this paradoxical statement, Camus attempts to convey the experience of self-actualization. This is the same purpose of saying that one is “reconciled” or has returned to a state of nature.⁷ In all three examples, there is the idea that one has found the deep meaning of life; a meaning that cannot be represented through explicit language and thus must be conveyed by way of metaphor. In addition, the use of verbs such as, to reconcile, to return, and to rediscover in these statements indicates that one has found something that had been lost – some sort of meaning in the world that had been missing. In this way, Camus’ rediscovery of his profound measure is both a reconciliation with his body and a return to a state of nature.

⁷ On page 32 of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* Camus writes that “si l’homme reconnaissait que l’univers lui aussi peut aimer et souffrir, il serait réconcilié” [if man recognizes that the universe can love and suffer too, he will be reconciled.] While Camus is describing the world becoming human, as opposed to a human becoming like the world, the end result is a union between subject and object – similar to what I am describing here. The use of words such as “réconcilié” [reconciled] indicate the union between two previously disparate objects, and are of great importance in understanding Camus.

This becomes clearer when the way in which Camus arrives at this state of grace is examined. As noted before, it is through the process of depersonalization, which then allows for a sensualist opening of oneself to the world. Gumbrecht and Wallace mention this path to grace as well. For them, it is the distancing of the body from the mind that allows for grace. Depersonalization would be one specific example of this. To convey this idea, Gumbrecht references the German author Heinrich von Kleist. He cites an essay published in 1810 entitled “On String Puppet Theater,” in which Kleist’s main argument is that puppets are graceful because they have an “inability to become self-reflexive and thus either embarrassed by or proud of themselves” (168). For Gumbrecht, then, the body becomes graceful when consciousness appears to be absent, allowing the body to act on its own. In this way, only the body’s graceful actions can be seen, whereas thought, subjectivity, and consciousness are eliminated from the equation. Gumbrecht notes that “grace...reminds us of how we are sometimes unable – happily unable, I should add – to associate the body movements we see with the intentions or thoughts of those who carry them out” (168-169).

Wallace notes this as well when writing about Federer. He claims that his grace was the reason that Federer was able to dominate men’s tennis in an era defined by brute strength and force. Noting that tennis is a game that “involves intervals of time too brief for deliberate action”; one is then forced to play based on “purely physical reactions that bypass conscious thought.” In other words, one must act without thinking. Federer is the master of this. Federer’s “‘kinesthetic sense’, meaning the ability to control the body and its artificial extensions through complex

and very quick systems of tasks”, is somehow more evolved than other players. This definition of a “kinesthetic sense” is reminiscent of “grace” because the “complex and very quick systems of tasks” are hidden from sight, leaving only the physical body seeming to act on its own. Indeed, Wallace notes that “English has a whole cloud of terms for various parts of this ability [the kinesthetic sense]: feel, touch, form, proprioception, coordination, hand-eye coordination, kinesthesia, grace...” Federer, to a greater extent than other tennis players, has “the ability to do by ‘feel’ what cannot be done by regular conscious thought.” And because of this, he is “deceptively effortless” and has a tennis game that is full of “beauty and genius.” Thus, he is more graceful than other tennis players because he thinks less. As for Gumbrecht, bodies become graceful for Wallace when their actions appear to take place without thought.

Rizzuto adds one more element to this definition of grace. In contrast to Gumbrecht and Wallace’s emphasis on the distancing of one’s body from one’s consciousness, Rizzuto emphasizes their closeness. He writes that Camus’ artistic goal in the essays of *Noces* is “to craft a seamless coincidence of thought and action” (6). In this way, Camus can make “his art as indistinguishable from his body as are his body’s graceful and athletic gestures” (7). Here, Rizzuto is writing about the form and language Camus uses in *Noces*. However, his understanding of grace is revealed as well when he notes that a “body’s graceful and athletic gestures” are the result of “a seamless coincidence of thought and action.” For Rizzuto, grace is the result of a consciousness and a physical body that are in perfect harmony.

This point makes our definition of grace slightly subtler. Gumbrecht and Wallace noted that grace occurs when action appears to take place without thought. But, just because something *appears* to take place without thought, this does not mean that no thought is present. Thought and consciousness could be very far away, as is the case with depersonalization, or thought could be so inseparably linked to action that it is invisible. For example, in Gumbrecht's discussion of Federer, it could be said that Federer is not really thinking less than other tennis players – what he is actually doing is thinking quicker. In both cases, thought cannot be seen, and all that is apparent is a graceful body.

Thus, Gumbrecht and Wallace's understanding of grace can be combined with Rizzuto's to create a definition of grace that explains Camus' experience at Tipasa: one begins by distancing one's body from consciousness. Then, by interacting with one's surroundings in a way that is unmediated by thought, one can eventually take on a new consciousness that represents one's union with the world, as opposed to one's distinction.

In "Noces à Tipasa," Camus conveys this passage of consciousness. He begins by distancing his mind from his body through the process of depersonalization, and then, prior to his description of discovering what he is, he begins to write from the first person perspective. But, it is not from a closed off identity as in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*; instead, it is from a different type of identity. For example, when Camus writes "que d'heures passées à écraser les absinthes, à caresser les ruines" [how many hours spent crushing absinthe plants, caressing ruins], he then ends the sentence by writing "à tenter d'accorder ma respiration aux soupirs tumultueux du

monde!” [trying to match my breathing with the tumultuous sighs of the world!] (16). In this way, Camus does finally put a marker of his personal subjectivity into the sentence. But, it is distinctly different from the other times when he does this. In this case, when he writes about “ma respiration” [my breathing] he notes that he is trying to match it with the “soupleurs tumultueux du monde” (16) [tumultuous sighs of the world]. Thus, even though he distinguishes himself as a distinct entity, it is in agreement with the world, not in opposition to it. He is not the distanced observer here, but a participant in the world’s proceedings. This different relationship becomes possible only because Camus begins as a depersonalized entity. From this position, he can then transform into a subject that is connected to the world.

Camus continues this line of reasoning when he then states that “enfoncé parmi les odeurs sauvages et les concerts d’insectes somnolents, j’ouvre les yeux et mon coeur à la grandeur insoutenable de ce ciel gorgé de chaleur” [pressed in among the savage odors and the concerts of drowsy insects, I open my eyes and my heart to the unsustainable grandeur of this sky gorged with heat] (16-17). Before Camus can open his eyes and his heart, he must be “enfoncé” [pressed in] among the savage odors and the insects – he must be a part of the natural world. Then, his action is not even to see or to touch, but to “ouvrir” [open] his eyes and his heart to the sky. In this way, he is opening himself (the key component of Derantey’s sensualist model), to the world in order to connect with it and to become it. After this description is when Camus summarizes this experience by writing that “ce n’est pas si facile de devenir ce qu’on est, de retrouver sa mesure profonde...j’apprenais à respirer, je m’intégrais et je m’accomplissais” (17) [It is not so easy to become what

one is, to rediscover one's profound measure...I learned to breathe, I integrated myself and I accomplished myself]. Here, the meaning of "apprenais à respirer"[learned to breathe] becomes clear as well. When he says this, Camus means that he has finally achieved unity with the world by matching his breathing with that of the world's "sopirs tumultueux" [tumultuous sighs]. Thus, the progression of this passage indicates the passage from a sensualist epistemological position to a state of grace. Camus begins by depersonalizing himself, then he opens himself to the world, and this culminates in his union with the world. In this way, he can then write from the first person because it is not an identity closed off from the world, but an identity bound up with the surrounding world.

From this analysis, it can be seen that Camus distances himself from his identity only to rediscover a new identity that is connected to the world. This is perhaps best shown when he writes "mais à regarder l'échine solide du Chenoua, mon coeur se calmait d'une étrange certitude" [but watching the solid spine of the Chenoua, my heart calmed itself with a strange certainty] (17). This quote is directly followed by "j'apprenais à respirer, je m'intégrais et je m'accomplissais" [I learned to breathe, I integrated myself and I accomplished myself] (17). Here, Camus begins with the impersonal form of the verb to see, writing "à regarder" [to watch/watching]. He does not write "je vois" [I see] or "je regarde" [I watch]. In fact, he doesn't even write "en regardant" [watching], which would more clearly indicate that the perceiving subject would follow in the sentence. Instead, he uses the striking construction of "à regarder." From this impersonal verb structure, Camus then notes that in looking at the "échine solide du Chenoua" [solid spine of the

Chenoua], his heart calms itself. Thus, from this depersonalized grammatical structure, which indicates his open subjectivity, Camus begins to merge with the world. It is as if the Chenoua exudes a feeling of calmness, and thus Camus' heart is calm as well. After identifying a physical part of his body, Camus can then take the next step to writing in the first person, this time indicating a subjectivity that arises from his physical body and is connected to the world.

Play and Grace

Up to this point, we have shown that a focus on one's body can lead to either the absurd or to grace – to a divorce with the world or to a union with the world. Other ideas have been hinted at as well. In Gumbrecht and Wallace's ideas about grace, they formulate their definitions based on athletes. This indicates that there is some type of connection between sport and grace. In addition, as we will soon see, Camus makes reference to theater and acting quite often in "Noces à Tipasa." This indicates that there is a connection between theater, acting, and grace. In addition, theater and sport are connected in that they are both forms of "play." That is to say, they are delineated from what one considers to be the real world and they exist in their own time and space. These are two of the basic rules of what constitutes something as play, and I will go into detail about these rules later in the essay. For now, we can agree upon the fact that theater and sport are forms of play; indeed, in these activities one *plays* a role. In theater, this is quite literal – one plays at being a completely different person. In sport, it is less clear, but still true – one plays a

position and has clearly defined instructions on how to act. In this way, theater and sport, as examples of play, are connected to grace. This is because play is the realm of grace. To play well, one must be as graceful as possible. And, when one plays well, one appears to be graceful. Thinking back to our definition of grace, this implies a couple things. First, one must distance oneself from one's personal consciousness. Once again, theater is perhaps a better example than sport. In the theater, one must literally forget who one is in order to become someone else. If the actor does not do this, he/she will be unconvincing and will not have performed well. In sport, a similar process occurs. One must leave one's daily concerns and worries outside the field of play in order to "get in the zone" and play well. If the athlete does not do this, he/she will not play well.

In this explanation of "depersonalization," we have already implied the second part of grace – one takes on a new subjectivity, or a new consciousness, that is in perfect agreement with one's body. In other words, consciousness and the body are inseparable. In theater, this occurs when an actor performs the gestures of the character assigned to him/her. By performing these gestures, the actor takes on the consciousness of whom he/she is playing. Thus, the actions that one performs serve as a ritual, which allows for the passage into a new consciousness. In sport, it is quite clear that the physical body takes precedence over the mind. One has to run, jump, slide, skate, leap, etc., and one has to do these things to the furthest extent possible. In performing these actions, one enters into the game and gets lost in its incredible intensity. In other words, one has a different consciousness that is tied up

with the game and one's body.⁸ When athletes retire, this feeling is often what they miss. Finally, in having this consciousness that is inseparable from one's physical actions, one appears graceful and thus at one with the surrounding world. In theater, the surrounding world is the stage. Thus, the actor will appear "at home" on the stage. This is the opposite of "stage-fright." In the same way, the athlete will appear like a natural on the playing field, like he/she was born playing their respective sport. Really, this is what sports commentators mean when they say that a hockey player skates so smoothly that he/she must have been "born with skates on his/her feet," or that a tennis player, such as Federer, was "born with a racket in his hand." These phrases indicate that the player is graceful, and at home on the field of play.

Thus, grace and play are intimately linked in that play is a primary avenue for the expression of grace. This is what Wallace notes when he writes that "high-level sports are a prime venue for the expression of human beauty." And yet, in the absurd world of Camus, play is hidden. This is because one must play through one's body, and due to the absurd one feels cut off from one's body. Because of this, to rediscover play one must enter into those places where play is still allowed and the body is still valued – the theater and the sports field. In this way, one rediscovers grace as well.

⁸ This experience, being in a "state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (Csikszentmihalyi 4), has come to be termed "flow" within the field of psychology. Evidently it is a very common human psychological state for humans to be in when they are playing sports or making art, just to name a couple of examples. It would not be a stretch to say that, in the language of psychology, Camus, Gumbrecht, and Wallace are all describing humans in a state of "flow."

In “Noces à Tipasa,” Camus is not on a stage or a sports field, but he still discovers grace. Indeed, occasionally grace still exists in everyday life. For Camus, grace can exist in the Mediterranean world because in *Noces* he idealizes it as a pre-modern world. In this pre-modern conception, Algeria is representative of a lost paradise that privileges the pleasures of the body in lieu of the mind. For example, in *L'Été à Alger*, the third essay of *Noces*, Camus writes that “la course des jeunes gens sur les plages de la Méditerranée rejoint les gestes magnifiques des athlètes de Délos” [the race of young people on the beaches of the Mediterranean recalls the magnificent gestures of the athletes of Delos] (47). This is in contrast to all of the time since the Greeks, when society “diminu[ait] la chair” [diminished the flesh] (47). By privileging the body and re-enacting the gestures of the Greeks, the Algerians have rediscovered grace. In fact, Camus notes that “à vivre ainsi près des corps et par le corps, on s’aperçoit qu’il a ses nuances, sa vie et, pour hasarder un non-sens, une psychologie, qui lui est propre” [to live so close to bodies and to live by the body, one sees that it has its nuances, its life, and to risk sounding nonsensical, a psychology which is unique to it] (47). In this description of a “psychology of a body,” Camus has described the consciousness, or subjectivity, of a graceful body.

While we have noted that Camus is not on a sports field here or in a theater in this section, he does still describe his experience of grace and the body in terms of sport. In referencing the athletes of Delos, he is indicating the connection between sport, or play, and grace. He does this in “Noces à Tipasa” as well. For example, he begins his narrative by setting up a dichotomy between the ruins at Tipasa and the

surrounding landscape. For Camus, a significant change occurs when he enters the ruins from the outside area. In other words, when Camus enters onto the “playing field” of the ruins, he becomes someone else. Indeed, Camus marks this passage from distanced observer to active participant by writing “avant d’entrer dans le royaume des ruines, pour la dernière fois nous sommes spectateurs” (15) [before entering into the kingdom of ruins, we are spectators for the last time]. By entering the “royaume des ruines” [kingdom of ruins], Camus is no longer a spectator but a player in some type of game. Just as the actor assumes a new role when he/she steps onto the stage, or as the athlete becomes someone slightly different by stepping onto the playing field, Camus too will assume a new role by entering the kingdom of ruins.

This is indicated by the subsequent sentence – “Au bout de quelques pas, les absinthes nous prennent à la gorge” (15) [After a few steps, the absinthe plants take us by the throat]. Here, Camus writes in the depersonalized style in that he does not posit a subject who is walking. Instead, he writes “au bout de quelques pas” [after a few steps], making himself the object of the sentence, while the surrounding world becomes the active subject. Indeed, it is “les absinthes” [the absinthe plants] that act, as they “nous prennent à la gorge” [take us by the throat]. In this way, Camus will interact with the kingdom of ruins to acquire a new subjectivity.

As with Camus’ description of the Algerians on the beach at Delos, he references play in “Noces à Tipasa” to indicate his “psychology of his body.” This time, he refers to theater as opposed to sport. It is worth quoting at length here, as he develops an extended analogy to the theater:

Il y a un sentiment que connaissent les acteurs lorsqu'ils ont conscience d'avoir bien rempli leur rôle, c'est-à-dire, au sens le plus précis, d'avoir fait coïncider leurs gestes et ceux du personnage idéal qu'ils incarnent, d'être entrés en quelque sorte dans un dessin fait à l'avance et qu'ils ont d'un coup fait vivre et battre avec leur propre coeur. C'était précisément cela que je ressentais : j'avais bien joué mon rôle. J'avais fait mon métier d'homme et d'avoir connu la joie tout un long jour ne me semblait pas une réussite exceptionnelle, mais l'accomplissement ému d'une condition qui, en certaines circonstances, nous fait un devoir d'être heureux. (24-25)

There is a feeling that actors know when they realize that they have filled out their role well. That is to say, in the most precise sense, to have made their gestures coincide with that of the ideal character that they embody, to have entered into a sort of premade outline that they then bring to life and make beat with their own heart. This was precisely what I had felt: I had played my role well. I had done my job of being a human and to have known joy for a whole day didn't seem to be an exceptional success to me, but the meaningful accomplishment of a condition which, in certain circumstances, makes it our job to be happy.

In this passage, Camus relates himself to an actor to show that he has achieved a state of grace. In other words, Camus has achieved a complete union

between his body and the surrounding world by distancing himself from his individual subjectivity. This phenomenon can best be explained through the metaphor of the actor, as Camus shows. When he writes that, like an actor, he has made his gestures coincide with that of the ideal character he embodies, Camus is indicating his entrance into the world of the ruins at Tipasa. Just as the actor can become the person he/she portrays by performing the bodily movements of that character, Camus too has become one with Tipasa by depersonalizing himself and becoming his senses and body. In this way, he communes with the surrounding world as the barrier between subject and object is erased. Indeed, since Camus has this psychology, or consciousness of his body, he feels that he *is* a body. Because of this, he feels that he is both his body and everything with which his body interacts, as the consciousness of a division between himself and the world is erased. This is why we can say that grace indicates both a consciousness of the body and a consciousness of one's union with the world.

Thus, it is clear that Camus emphasizes his feeling of oneness, his feeling of grace, throughout the essay. And it is in order to describe this feeling that he uses the metaphor of the actor. This is apparent at the end of the quotation, when Camus makes a statement that recalls his reference to "*devenir ce qu'on est*" [becoming what one is]. He writes that "*j'avais bien joué mon rôle. J'avais fait mon métier d'homme*" (18) [I had played my role well. I had done my job of being a human]. In doing his job of a man, or of a human being, Camus feels that he has played a role assigned to him. This is quite similar to when Camus writes that he has become what he is and to Gumbrecht's notion of a return to a state of nature. In all the cases,

the subject feels integrated into their surroundings and thus purposeful and meaningful.⁹ Indeed, this is why Camus writes that he has “entré en quelque sorte dans un dessin fait à l’avance” [entered into a sort of premade outline]. In these conceptions of humanity, there is an order to the world. One is not stumbling through life trying to find one’s way. Instead, what one must do has already been laid out. This is just like in theater, where one knows what actions must be made and what the end result will be. Everything has been constructed in advance, all one must do is follow the steps laid out for them. In this type of play, if one performs the correct physical movements, one will succeed. In life, this is not the case. For Camus, this is because the world is not meaningful. One’s actions do not always have foreseeable consequences. Instead, luck, risk, and fortune are at play. Because of this, the world will disrupt one’s goals and desires. However, as Camus shows throughout “Noces à Tipasa,” it is possible to feel as if there is a meaning in the world, and as if one has had a plan laid out for them. This is not to say that this is true – just that it is possible to feel this way.¹⁰

This feeling, as Camus writes in *L’Été à Alger* [Summer in Algiers] (the third essay of *Noces*), arises from a subjectivity focused on the body. This apparent contradiction means that one feels as if one is a body, in contrast to feeling as if one

⁹ Camus uses this terminology of doing one’s job well quite often in his writing. For him, it seems to express something concrete and relatable, and thus is a more useful ethical stance than an abstract ethics. For a more complete discussion, see “‘Bien faire son métier:’ Travail et réflexion éthique chez Camus” by Guy Basset.

¹⁰For more on the way chance and luck connect with the absurd and the absence of eternal values, look to David H. Walker’s essay on the role of “le hasard” [chance] in his essay “Camus et l’éthique du hasard” [Camus and the Ethic of Chance]. This essay can also be connected to the theory of play to show how play introduces rules to create order, but also allows for controlled disorder due to chance.

is a mind in possession of a body. It could be connected to Gumbrecht's reference about returning to a state of nature, as in this state there is no mind-body split. It could also be related to Wallace's idea about "reconciliation," as reconciliation indicates two things coming together – here it is the mind and the body. All of these definitions seek to express a feeling of grace and thus a connection with one's surroundings. We are reminded of Camus' statement that he "becomes what [he] is" as well. This subjectivity of the body can be explored further.

Rizzuto writes that in "Noces à Tipasa" "each physical gesture traced in human time mimes a timeless gesture in nature" (8). In this way, through his physical actions and his body, Camus rediscovers what he is and what he should be. In doing away with anything that is not part of the physical world, the "je" [I] of which Camus speaks is one of primordial man. That is to say, as Rizzuto does, that the subject of "Noces à Tipasa" is "released from sin, chastity, or moderation, rediscovered after centuries of Christianity" (11). In other words, morality and ethics have not yet come into being and taken hold of the minds of human beings. Because of this, one can act as a body. Another way to describe this would be to say that Camus has become man before his fall from grace.¹¹ Rizzuto notes this when he writes that in this essay "Camus is reenacting the fall of man to reverse it" (7). Instead of "a human body divided against itself, dual" (7), Camus is at one with himself and the world. In addition, this is precisely because he has acted as a physical body. He has interacted with the surrounding world primarily through his

¹¹ Camus was certainly aware of this connection. His posthumous novel entitled *Le Premier homme* [*The First Man*] (1994) has been interpreted as Camus' attempt, in an autobiographical fashion, to describe man before the fall. For more on this interpretation see the conclusion of Srigley's *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity*.

bodily senses and not with his mind or his intellect. This, in effect, puts him in the role of Adam – the first man. In Genesis, Adam is neither proud nor ashamed of his body; in fact, he has no self-consciousness at all. It is not until his “fall from grace” that he becomes aware of his nakedness and ashamed of his body. Before this, he is able to live in harmony with the natural world of the Garden of Eden. Camus is, in a way, telling the same story. Before writing about the absurd and his distance from the world in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, in “Noces à Tipasa” he describes his union with the natural world and his physical senses. In this way, Camus is graceful, as, like Adam, he has no self-consciousness.¹²

This idea of Camus as a being released from human concerns is also made by Rizzuto. He specifically invokes this idea in writing about Camus’ graceful swimming at Tipasa. In Rizzuto’s idea, Camus acquires the timeless persona of a god. He cites the line where Camus describes “les bras vernis d’eau sortis de la mer pour se dorer dans le soleil” [his arms varnished by water and rising out of the sea to turn gold in the sunlight] (*Noces* 19) as a prime example of this. Rizzuto highlights the importance of the words “varnish” and “gold” as they “transform an athletic body into a living statue, an object of aesthetic beauty that solves the problem of the inner versus the outer self” (8). As Camus no longer has a distinction between his inner and outer self, his mind and his body, he has become graceful. Because of this, he is no longer himself but is now something else entirely. Rizzuto places importance on Camus’ remark that he has “le duvet blond” [soft blond hair] (*Noces* 19) which

¹² Similar in tone and theme to *Noces* and also written before *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* are *L’Envers et l’endroit* [*The Wrong Side and the Right Side*] and *La Mort heureuse* [*A Happy Death*]. Many more examples of grace and an emphasis on the physical body can be found in these works.

invokes his previous remark about turning gold. Since Camus actually has black hair, Rizzuto underlines this remark to note that it indicates Camus' transition into a celestial being, as "angels are blond" (8). In describing Camus as a celestial being, Rizzuto proves the same point as when he says that Camus is man before his fall. In both cases, angel/god and primeval man are graceful beings in that they either have unity between their mind and their body, or they are unconcerned by this problem.

Gumbrecht makes a similar point, and does this by writing about the possibility for bodies to become heavenly. He does so within the context of sports competition. Gumbrecht writes that "the drama of competition is responsible for the transfiguration of great athletes within our immediate perception and, later, our memory. A person who has been transfigured appears to be removed from his or her original place" (78). In this way, an athlete becomes something other than himself. Gumbrecht then goes on to cite the New Testament, noting that "when the disciples followed Jesus 'to a high mountain,' they saw before them the shining bodies of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Likewise, athletic competition can transfigure bodies and their movements, making them shine in the particular light of triumphant victory or tragic defeat" (79). Here, we must think back to Rizzuto, who wrote about Camus becoming gold in order to become a god or an angel. In this same way, says Gumbrecht, athletes too can become holy figures. They can acquire the appearance of what one "used to call a halo – and what today we might call an aura" (79). But why does this happen? As we have been saying, it is when a body becomes graceful that it is able to take on a new character. Or, to reverse the

process, by becoming a new character, by playing a role, one can become graceful. In either case, all that is apparent is the body, while consciousness is hidden.

While it is true that Gumbrecht cites “the drama of competition” as the cause of this transfiguration of bodies, one could argue that this is actually the setting. Just as with the physical setting of Tipasa for Camus, the competition is a pretext that allows bodies to become graceful. However, it is not the cause. After all, Camus’ body undergoes this same transformation, but he is not competing. Gumbrecht actually contradicts his own argument when he talks about, who else, Roger Federer. He notes that “we associate elegance and effortlessness with his flowing movements on the court...the form and the rhythm of these movements, as an object of our perception and our memory... are unique, and they symbolize – by transfiguration – what we call ‘vintage Federer’” (79). Here, Gumbrecht notes that it is Federer’s physical, bodily movement, his “gestures” (79), that transfigure him. One can argue that it is not actually competition that transfigures him; this is just the setting where the transfiguration occurs. Play allows for this transfiguration to happen. Then, once Federer begins performing the physical gestures of tennis, these act as a ritual which transform him into a graceful figure. This is the same process Camus undergoes when he swims – he is transfigured by his swimming gestures into a graceful, perhaps holy figure. The thread between the two is that they have perfectly aligned their consciousness with their body to move in the most graceful and beautiful way possible.

We have been describing these holy, celestial figures to show the type of consciousness that one takes on when one has a consciousness premised solely on

the body. In becoming one's body, it is possible to take on the identity, for a time, of man before his fall or of an angel or god. The subject becomes distanced from metaphysics and things like truth or justice, because he/she is above these merely human concepts. In this way, one plays the role of an immortal, if only for a short time. This same idea is actually mentioned by Heinrich von Kleist, in the same "On String Puppet Theater" that we used to define grace. In talking about "the third chapter of Genesis," he relates the "disorder that self-consciousness imposes on the natural grace of the human being" (3). This relates back to Rizzuto's understanding of Camus as man before the fall. In the same way, says Kleist, man before his fall is graceful because he has not yet been burdened with self-consciousness. Because of this, he is not divided from himself.

All of these descriptions of subjectivity are how Camus feels himself to be at Tipasa. He is not really himself, but has entered into another sort of identity. He feels himself to have performed a role, but it is precisely because of this, because he feels to have entered the realm of play, that he can have this special consciousness. This description could be compared to when Camus attempts to define his identity in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. He writes that "si j'essaie de saisir ce moi dont je m'assure, si j'essaie de le définir et de le résumer, il n'est plus qu'une eau qui coule entre mes doigts" [If I try to seize this I of which I assure myself, if I try to define it and summarize it, it is nothing more than water that runs through my fingers] (34). Here, Camus writes about his identity and tries to define it through language. This is in direct contrast to *Noces*, where he discovers his identity, "ce qu'on est" [what one is] through physically interacting with the world. In this way, it is evident that one

can find meaning in the world (or banish the problem of meaning) through identifying with one's body and the surrounding world. At the same time, as noted in the first section, it is possible to arrive at the absurd by identifying with the physical body and the world as well.

Play and the Absurd

In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus writes about the actor just as he does in "Noces à Tipasa." And, just like in this essay, the actor serves as a representation of grace – as a representation of one who is not divided from his/her body and is thus at one with the surrounding world. For example, Camus notes that in the actor "le corps et l'esprit se rejoignent et se serrent" [the body and the spirit merge and press together] (113). When this occurs, the actor can play his role to perfection, because he/she achieves a total unity between consciousness and action. At the same time, Camus is writing about the actor in this section as an illustration of an absurd human being; in other words, as an example of someone who has taken up the wager of the absurd – someone who "poursui[t] le raisonnement absurde en lui donnant son attitude et [sa] chaleur" [follows the absurd reasoning by giving it an attitude and a passion](95). Thus, one might expect the actor to be divided from his consciousness. This is not the case, indicating that in fact the theater unites both grace and the absurd. Thus, it could also be said that "play," (a broader definition of theater) unites both grace and the absurd. As we have shown, play allows one to be

graceful. In this section, I will develop the connection between the absurd and play to show how realizing that life is absurd is equivalent to realizing that life is a game.

How is this possible? First we must examine the sociological definition of play. This has already been hinted at, but it is worth going into detail. The first person to attempt a comprehensive definition of play was Johan Huizinga in his 1936 book *Homo Ludens*. From this exploration, many other works have followed that have subtly adjusted what play can be, such as Roger Caillois' 1958 work *Les Jeux et les hommes*. While play theory has been updated and revised, its basic tenets have remained the same.¹³

As Huizinga notes, the most basic rule of play is that “play is a voluntary activity” (7). One cannot be forced into play, but instead one must choose to participate. At first, this rule seems to greatly differentiate play from normal life. After all, one does not decide to be born, one just is and then must deal with the consequences. However, to a mind imbued with the absurd, the situation is different. This is why Camus is so interested in suicide throughout *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* – when the possibility of ending one’s life becomes a conscious thought in one’s mind, a choice that one must make, the game of life *does* become a voluntary activity. One can end one’s life at any time to escape the absurd. Thus, life becomes voluntary and one decides to play or not to play.

¹³ The book *Reading Games* by Bohman-Kalaja presents an overview of theories of play, tying the most prominent together and indicating their differences and similarities. It is this book that directed me to sociological understandings of play, and allowed me to conclude that *Homo Ludens* could serve as the work from which I explain the definition of play. While there are other more recent explorations of play, *Homo Ludens* is the most useful for our purposes, as we will focus more on Camus than on the minute intricacies of play.

The second fundamental rule of play is that “play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality and duration” (9). In other words, play exists in its own time and space. This is another thing one realizes about life when one understands the absurd. With regard to time, realizing the absurd is realizing the finite nature of one’s existence. Up until this point of realization “tout le monde [vit] comme si personne ‘ne savait.’ C’est qu’en réalité, il n’y a pas d’expérience de la mort” [everyone lives as if no one ‘knew.’ This is because in reality, there is no experience of death] (LMDS 30). Thus, people live as if they will not die, and they hope for a future that eschews the present. In this way, one lives as if life does not have a definitive end point. However, when “le sentiment de l’absurdité...[frappe] à la face” [the feeling of absurdity...[strikes] the face] (LMDS 24), one becomes aware of one’s death and of one’s finite nature. In the same way, when one sees a “corps inerte où une gifle ne marque plus” [an inert body where a slap causes no reaction] (30), one realizes the “sentiment absurde” [absurd feeling] (30). Thus, realizing the absurd is realizing one’s mortal condition – the supreme expression of a world indifferent to one’s hopes and wishes.

In regard to play having its own spatiality, realizing the absurdity of life is also realizing that life is confined to the physical world. This theme has been developed throughout the essay. For Camus, the absurd indicates a confinement to the physical world and a lack of any world beyond this one. To go one step further, it indicates a confinement to one’s physical body. As we have noted, the concept of grace allows one to transcend one’s body to commune with the outside world and even feel like a celestial being. Thus, grace transcends the confines of time and

space. This is not true for the absurd. When one feels that life is absurd, one feels that one's body is dividing oneself from the world. In this way, one is trapped inside one's body. Thus, it is the physical, mortal body that confines life to a defined time and space. In this way, realizing that life is absurd satisfies two conditions of play: it is voluntary and it exists in its own time and space.

The third criterion for play is that it is rule guided. Life is rule guided as well, with laws and regulations that one must follow as a member of society. The connection between the rules of play and the rules of life, to an absurd mind, can be taken a step further. Huizinga notes that "as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses" (11). The person who transgresses the rules of play is a "spoil-sport" who "shatters the play-world itself" and who "robs play of its illusion" (11). Is Huizinga not describing the same understanding of rules that an absurd consciousness has? To the absurd mind, there are no eternal values or ethics – all rules are arbitrary. Indeed, when Camus explores his illustrations of the absurd person, he notes that "ce ne sont donc point des règles éthiques que l'esprit absurde peut chercher" [there are thus no ethical rules for which the absurd spirit can search](95). There are no ethically objective rules to the absurd mind, just rules that are created by humans and thus only have meaning within the sphere of human life. These rules have no objective justification. Indeed, Camus notes that "toutes les morales sont fondées sur l'idée qu'un acte a des conséquences qui le légitiment ou l'oblitérent" [all moralities are founded on the idea that an act has consequences that legitimize it or obliterate it] (94-95), but one who understands the absurd does not accept this. Instead, the person who is absurd "juge seulement que ces suites

doivent être considérées avec sérénité...il n'y a pas de coupables" [judges only that these facts must be considered with serenity...no one is guilty] (95). In saying that no one is guilty, Camus notes the arbitrary rules of life, just as the spoilsport does. No one is guilty because one can only be "guilty" within a game that one agrees to play. If one does not subscribe to these rules, the illusion of justice and morality disappears – "les décors s'écroulent" [the stage sets collapse] (27), as Camus would say. And yet, the absurd mind does not play the role of the spoil-sport. This would be to claim that life is meaningless and to thus quit life; in other words, to commit suicide. As we know, this is the opposite of Camus' response. Instead, he accepts the meaningfulness of the game and plays anyways, just as the athlete or actor does. This is because one can find meaning within the game, even though it will not extend past the boundaries of the game. In this way, as Camus shows, one can find moments of grace in life and life can, momentarily at least, have a meaning.¹⁴

Thus, these three rules of play – that it is voluntary, confined to a certain time and space, and rule guided – are all quite evident facts about life to the absurd mind. In this way, play and life can be seen to be very similar. However, Huizinga proposes other rules that are slightly problematic. His other rules for play say that "play is not 'ordinary' or 'real life'" (8) and that play is "not serious" (13). At first glance, it would seem that saying play is not "real life" makes sense. After all, real life is made up of school, a job, monetary concerns, and other "serious" things. However, this

¹⁴ While I have chosen to explore games, play, and grace in *La Peste*, an intriguing analysis could be done of *La Chute* (*The Fall*). In particular, Clamence as cast in the role of the spoil-sport who decries the game of life as meaningless. Not only thematically, but on the level of diction as well this text is infused with references to play and games.

statement about play also raises the question of what constitutes “real life.” To an absurd mind, there is no distinction between play and real life. We could note all the times that Camus makes reference to life as a sort of game throughout *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*.¹⁵ In addition, we have already noted that an absurd mind is aware of the arbitrariness of the rules underlying real life. The term “real life” presupposes a type of existence with objective rules, with unquestionable rights and wrongs, and, with a meaning – in this way, it is clearly distinct from play, which is meaningless and arbitrary. However, the absurd mind does not agree to this conception of real life. To the absurd mind, “real life” has all the characteristics of a game that one plays. In this way, Huizinga’s rule about play being distinct from real life holds no water for the absurd person. The same could be said about Huizinga’s rule that play is “not serious” (13). This rule can be objected to first on the grounds that it is not true. While one may enjoy him/herself and have fun in playing a game, this does not mean that it is not serious. *Within* the confines of the game, it is very serious. Huizinga notes this himself when he writes that play “is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony” (10). If something contains such noble qualities, how could it not be serious? Really, Huizinga makes an error in differentiating play from seriousness. What he really means to say is that play is not serious when regarded from outside the confines of

¹⁵ To name just a few: he refers to suicide in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* as a “jeu mortel” [mortal game] (17), refers to the absurd as a divorce between “l’acteur et son décor” [the actor and his stage] (18), and notes that “pour un homme qui ne *triche* pas, ce qu’il croit vrai doit régler son action” [for a man who doesn’t *cheat*, what he believes to be true must guide his action. (19) [*italics mine*]. It is true that one may refer to life in this way with no specific intentions, but in Camus’ writing the analogy of life as play is so ubiquitous that it draws attention to itself.

the game. Within the game itself, it has a meaning that is bound up in the world of the game. When the game is over, the meaning created ends and a new game will begin.¹⁶ The absurd person has the same understanding of life when he/she realizes the absurd. When “les décors s’écroulent” [the stage sets collapse] (27), everything that gave life its seriousness suddenly seems meaningless. Thus, as one looks at life from the outside, it is seen as empty and insignificant. But, this is not the endpoint for the absurd person. As he/she contemplates life, and thus contemplates suicide, suicide becomes the single “problem philosophique vraiment sérieux” (15) [really serious philosophical problem]. Then when one decides to enter into the game of life, when Sisyphus decides to push the boulder up the hill, life becomes meaningful and serious within the confines of the physical world. It is in these moments that one feels graceful. Of course, from outside the realm of life, life is *still* meaningless. But, if just for a moment, this is beside the point. Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill is incredibly serious and engaged in his work. He is happy, too.

In this way, three rules of play are agreed upon, while the latter two only make sense to someone who has not yet realized the absurd. When one realizes the absurd, one sees life as a game (citing the first three rules), and the latter two rules are seen to describe neither life nor play.¹⁷ The end result is the experience of life as a game.

Thus, the absurd and play are intimately connected. Play and grace are also quite connected. To take this thought to its logical conclusion, the absurd and grace

¹⁶ For the sake of convenience, we are only considering “pure” forms of play, such as a pick up soccer game. Obviously, defining play becomes more complicated when one considers professional sports.

¹⁷ They could also be said to describe both, as the result is the same.

are also related to each other, perhaps more so than was first apparent. Throughout this essay, I have noted that grace and the absurd both arise from the body and that they describe the way in which one interacts with the surrounding world through one's body. While they indicate opposing relationships one can have with regard to the world, there is a way for grace and the absurd to coexist and work together. Camus himself shows this in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, showing that if one sees life as absurd and maintains this throughout every waking moment, one can also achieve a state of grace in normal life, as playing allows one to become graceful. This is perhaps why Camus is so adamant about maintaining a perpetual consciousness of the absurd – why one must “soutenir le pari déchirant et merveilleux de l'absurde” [take up the heart-breaking and marvelous wager of the absurd] (75), and refuse at all costs “le saut” [the leap] which resolves the absurd.¹⁸ In a paradoxical way, it seems that the logic of the absurd indicates the potential of grace in one's life. This is best explained with Camus' own metaphor of Sisyphus.

In Camus' story of Sisyphus, play, grace, and the absurd all come together. To begin with, the game that Sisyphus is playing is the rolling of a boulder up a hill. In Camus' understanding of the myth, this act is voluntary. Certainly, it would not appear to be voluntary, as Sisyphus must roll the boulder up the hill for eternity and is condemned to do so by the gods. However, the way in which Camus describes Sisyphus indicates that Sisyphus himself understands his act to be voluntary. For example, Camus describes Sisyphus as contemplating his task, thus indicating that

¹⁸ This should not be read as trying to prove that Camus consciously thinks maintaining the absurd will lead to grace. To him, this may even be an example of “le saut” [the leap]. Rather, I am showing that his words can be read in this way and indicate this. What his actual intentions are would be impossible to say.

he is wondering whether he must continue with it or not. Indeed, “il contemple cette suite d’actions sans lien qui devient son destin” [he contemplates this random series of actions that become his destiny] (168). Camus also indicates that the absurd man, here understood to be Sisyphus, “dit oui et son effort n’aura plus de cesse” [says yes and his effort will be without end] (167). Evidently, Sisyphus could have said no. Thus, at least in the mind of Sisyphus, his act is voluntary and thus starts to become analogous to play.¹⁹

Sisyphus’ act is also constrained by time and space. As he rolls the boulder up the hill, he knows that just as he reaches the top of the hill, the boulder will roll back down again. This is game over. In other words, the point when the game stops and its meaning also stops. It is the same for Sisyphus, as the boulder rolls back down the hill, making all of his effort count for nothing. In this way, Sisyphus’ act is limited with regard to time.

In regard to space, it is also limited. For example, when Camus writes of Sisyphus’ world, he notes that “chacun des grains de cette pierre, chaque éclat minéral de cette montagne pleine de nuit, à lui seul, forme un monde” (168) [to him alone, each of the grains of this rock, each mineral flake of this mountain full of night, forms a world]. In other words, Sisyphus sees that his world is a finite one, with nothing beyond it existing. Of course, there is the faint reminder of the real world for Sisyphus. But, in choosing to stay in the underworld with his rock, he

¹⁹ Let us not forget that Sisyphus has escaped from the underworld before, as Camus himself notes in the beginning of this section. It is this refusal to return to the underworld that seals his fate of rolling the boulder. Thus, it is not out of the question that he could escape again, indicating why he understands his act to be voluntary.

eliminates that world and chooses to make the rock and hill his world. He makes the conscious decision to confine himself to this underground world, just as one willingly chooses to play a game and accepts the confines that go with it.

Finally, Sisyphus notes the arbitrariness and meaninglessness of the rules of this world. As we have noted, this occurs when one is outside of the confines of the game. For Sisyphus, this is when he descends the hill and contemplates the meaninglessness of his task. As Camus notes, “si ce mythe est tragique, c’est que son héros est conscient” [if this myth is tragic, it’s that its hero is conscious] (165). If he were not conscious of his task as meaninglessness, as absurd, it would not be tragic as he could then hope. Yet, Sisyphus is aware of “sa misérable condition: c’est à elle qu’il pense pendant sa descente” [his miserable condition: that is what he thinks of during his descent] (166).

By analyzing Sisyphus’ understanding of his absurd task, it is apparent that he understands this task to be a game. As we have noted, he plays voluntarily, his actions are confined by time and space, and he notes the ultimate meaninglessness of the game. However, he plays anyway, and in the same way that a player completely immersed in a game finds the game meaningful, Sisyphus too finds his task to be meaningful. Camus writes that as soon as Sisyphus decides to roll the boulder up the hill, to participate in the game, “cet univers désormais sans maître ne lui paraît ni stérile ni futile” (168) [this universe that is now without a master seems neither sterile nor futile to him]. All of a sudden, Sisyphus’ task becomes meaningful. In this way, Sisyphus becomes a graceful figure. By accepting this supremely physical task, he does not deny what his body must do. On the contrary, he merges his

consciousness with his bodily actions to push the boulder up the hill. In this way, there is no divide between his mind and his body. Finally, this allows him to feel at one with his surroundings – the rock and the hill suddenly have meaning. He does not feel distanced from his universe, but connected. And he is connected through the bodily action of rolling the boulder. Indeed, it is “la lutte elle-même vers les sommets” [the battle itself towards the summits], the physical act, that “suffit à remplir un coeur d’homme” [is enough to fill a man’s heart] (168). This is why “il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux” [it is necessary to imagine Sisyphus happy] (168).

La Peste

Throughout this essay I have been drawing connections among the body, grace, play, and the absurd. While subjects such as grace and the absurd indicate opposing relationships between people and the world, I have shown that they can be united by the concept of play. In addition, the concepts of grace, play and the absurd are all premised upon one’s physical, bodily existence. We have been exploring these ideas with regard to two of Camus’ early essays, “Noces à Tipasa” and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. These essays were written and published before any of Camus’ three published novels.²⁰ Because of this, it can be assumed that the themes

²⁰ I’m excluding here *La Mort heureuse*, written between 1936 and 1938 but published posthumously in 1971 and *Le Premier homme*, a manuscript of which was discovered in 1960 but was left unpublished until 1994. That being said, what I’ve written about in my essay could most certainly be explored in these novels, perhaps more so than his published novels. Since neither of these novels were published, they are often considered more personal and perhaps more revealing than Camus’ published fiction.

discussed here form the themes of his novels as well. In this way, what I have been doing in this essay is creating a reading strategy, a frame if you will, through which one can regard Camus' novels. To show how this might be done, I will now explore some of the ways in which grace, play, the body, and the absurd interconnect in Camus' 1947 novel, *La Peste*.²¹

La Peste tells the story of a plague that infects the city of Oran in Algeria. In this novel, Oran is not exactly the Mediterranean paradise that Tipasa is in "Noces à Tipasa." Nevertheless, it performs a similar function in that the absurd is not present in this environment. Camus dedicates the first chapter of *La Peste* to a general description of Oran, and this seems to be his purpose. He notes that "ce qui est... original dans notre ville est la difficulté qu'on peut y trouver à mourir" [what is... original in our city is the difficulty that one can find in dying there] (15). Death is hidden and ignored in Oran. In this way, one does not realize that the world is indifferent to one's actions. Indeed, the city of Oran lives as if it does not know death, recalling Camus' notion that before one realizes the absurd "tout le monde [vit] comme si personne 'ne savait'" [everyone lives as if no one 'knew'] (LMDS 30). In the Oran of *La Peste*, people die "pendant qu'à la même minute, toute une population, au telephone ou dans les cafés, parle de traits, de connaissances et d'escompte" [while at the same minute, an entire population, on telephones or in cafes, speaks of traits, bills of lading, or discounts] (15). Evidently, the people of Oran do not speak on their telephones inside telephone booths. In addition, Oran "favorise justement des habitudes" [rightly favors habits] and because of this "tout

²¹ I am using Stuart Gilbert's translation of *La Peste* as a reference for my translations.

est pour le mieux” [all is for the best] (16). Once again, one is forced to think of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and Camus’ remark that one lives by a sense of habit before recognizing the absurd – “lever, tramway, quatre heures de bureau ou d’usine, repas, tramway, quatre heures de travail, repas, sommeil et lundi mardi mercredi jeudi vendredi et samedi sur le même rythme” [wake, tram, four hours at the office or the factory, meal, trams, four hours of work, meal, tiredness and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday in the same rhythm] (27). It is not until “le ‘pourquoi’ s’élève” [the ‘why’ awakens] (27) that the feeling of absurdity sets in. In *La Peste*, it is the plague itself that brings the absurd into the world of Oran, disrupting one’s habits and foregrounding the human death that Oran has ignored.

After this short introduction, the plague soon begins and the absurd begins to take over the city of Oran. Dr. Rieux, the main character and narrator of the novel, plays the part of Sisyphus, trying to save as many people as he can while all the evidence tells him that it is hopeless. As the book continues, the plague gets stronger and stronger, and eventually begins to overwhelm even Dr. Rieux. While Camus showed in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* how maintaining perpetual consciousness of the absurd can lead to happiness and even grace, this is an ideal situation. In reality, the absurd can be overwhelming and depressing for even the strongest of spirits. Thinking back to how grace and the absurd indicate differing states of being in relation to the universe, it is evident that sometimes the absurd banishes grace from the world – in making one feel divided from the world, the route to rejoin the world and one’s body is blocked. Indeed, the plague is perhaps the supreme expression of the absurd in that it makes one fearful of one’s own body. When one is infected with

the plague, one truly becomes a stranger to both oneself and the surrounding world. Thus, Camus' idealism at the end of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* does not always seem possible. In times like these, it is necessary to search out experiences of grace by entering into the realm of play. Gumbrecht, Wallace, and Camus himself have given examples of this through sport and through theater.

This search for grace and play occurs in *La Peste* when Dr. Rieux and Tarrou, two of the most passionate fighters against the plague, decide to take a momentary pause from work and go for a swim. To do this, the two must leave the city to find the Mediterranean Sea. In leaving the city, they also leave the physical confines of the plague. Thus, they also leave the zone of the absurd. Indeed, the difference between the city and the sea is made apparent by the fact that Rieux and Tarrou “montr[ent] leurs papiers à un garde qui les examin[e] assez longuement” [show their papers to a guard who examines them for a while] (280) to pass through “des grilles du port” [the gates of the port](280). The city and the sea are separate in a way that recalls Camus' description of the ruins at Tipasa. Just as he describes the ruins as a sort of stadium that one must enter into, in the same way Rieux and Tarrou must cross a physical threshold in order to reach the beach and the sea. By doing this, they enter into a place where one might play and rediscover grace.

As Rieux and Tarrou arrive at the sea, the sea becomes the active subject as “elle sifflait doucement aux pieds des grands blocs de la jetée” [it whistled softly at the feet of the large blocks of the jetty](280). Then, as “ils les gravissaient, elle [la mer] leur apparut, épaisse comme du velours, souple et lisse comme une bête” [they climbed up, it [the sea] appeared to them, thick as velvet, and smooth and supple as

a beast] (281). In this one sentence, the active subject switches from the sea, to Rieux and Tarrou, and then back to the sea with the two characters as the object of the sea's action. In this way, Camus' description of the sea is bound up with the two characters' perception of the sea and their actions. There seems to be a connection between Rieux, Tarrou, and the sea, and this is further evidenced by the fact that they "s'install[ent] sur les rochers tournés vers la large" [sit down on the rocks turned towards the open sea] (281). Now that they are facing the sea, "cette respiration calme de la mer faisait naître et disparaître des reflets huileux à la surface des eaux" [this calm breathing of the sea birthed and made disappear oily reflections on the surface of the waters] (281). Once again, after Rieux and Tarrou are described as the subject of the sentence, it is then the sea that takes over. This interplay of subject and object prefaces their eventual union – the oneness of Rieux and Tarrou with the sea. The symbolic act that indicates their union is the act of swimming, but before even this occurs their union is prefaced again by Camus' mention of "des reflets huileux à la surface des eaux" [oily reflections on the surface of the waters]. Nowhere in this sentence does Camus indicate what is oily and reflected by the water.²² Perhaps it is their bodies. Thinking back to Gumbrecht, he notes that one of the fascinations of sport is the presentation of the body, and that the Greeks took this fascination furthest in making athletes' bodies shine with oil. Camus has also mentioned his fascination with Greek athletes, particularly when he writes about the beaches of Algeria in "L'Été à Alger" and how "pour la première fois depuis deux mille ans, le corps a été mis nu sur des plages...aujourd'hui...la

²² The English translation has taken the liberty of assuming that it is oil lights.

course des jeunes gens sur les plages de la Méditerranée rejoint les gestes magnifiques des athlètes de Délos” [for the first time in two thousand years, the body was presented naked on the beaches...today... the race of young people on the beaches of the Mediterranean recalls the magnificent gestures of the athletes of Delos] (47). From this reading, it would appear that Camus is positing Rieux and Tarrou as the incarnations of Greek athletes, just as he views himself and the other beach-goers in “L’Été à Alger.” This reading is further validated by the beginning of the next paragraph, which begins with the short sentence, “ils se déshabillèrent” [they undressed] (281). By stripping themselves of their clothes, Rieux and Tarrou do away with all physical barriers between themselves and the surrounding world, just as the Greek athletes did when competing in the Olympics. Camus views nakedness as an important step in interacting with the world, indicated by when he writes in this same section of “L’Été à Alger” that “depuis vingt siècles, les hommes...diminu[aient] la chair et compliqu[aient] l’habit” [for twenty centuries, men...have diminished the flesh and complicated clothing] (47). By disrobing, Rieux and Tarrou further position themselves as incarnations of the Greeks and are thus able to achieve what Camus terms “une psychologie” [psychology] of the body. From this point, they are almost ready to enter the sea.

However, just before plunging into the sea Camus notes that Rieux “était plein d’un étrange bonheur” [was full of a strange happiness] (281). Why does Camus write of an “étrange” (strange) happiness here? Because the happiness that Rieux has is a happiness in Camus’ understanding of the word, and thus it takes on slightly different meaning. Another time Camus speaks of a sort of strange

happiness is at Tipasa, when he describes the feeling of being like an actor who has played his role well. Indeed, Camus writes in this case that “j’avais au coeur une joie étrange” [I had a strange joy in my heart] (24). In this example, Camus writes of joy, which is slightly different than happiness. Nonetheless, the strangeness remains. Finally, we might recall Camus’ description of how he feels when looks at the spine of the Chenoua in “Noces à Tipasa.” He notes that “mon coeur se calmait d’une étrange certitude” [my heart calmed itself with a strange certainty] (17). In all three cases, the emotions Camus (or Rieux) feels is slightly different – happiness, joy, or certainty. Yet, all three are “étrange” [strange]. This is because these three positive emotions occur when one is beginning to feel at one with the surrounding world. Camus in “Noces à Tipasa” feels connected to the natural world of Tipasa, even like an integral part of it, and that is how Rieux is beginning to feel here by watching the sea. This feeling is incredibly difficult to describe, as it is not one that is completely in the subjects’ control. Thus, to define oneself and say how one feels is practically impossible, indicating why Camus decides on the word “étrange” [strange] to summarize his feelings.

Rieux and Tarrou then begin to swim. After swimming for a few strokes, Camus writes that “Rieux se mit sur le dos et se tint immobile, face au ciel renversé, plein de lune et d’étoiles” [Rieux put himself on his back and held himself immobile, facing the overturned sky, full of the moon and stars] (281). This image is an evocative one, and recalls the image of Meursault in *L’Étranger* who is “avec des étoiles sur le visage” [with stars on his face] (118) after he wakes up at night in his prison cell. Deranty cites this image as “typical of Camus’ sensualism” (522) as there

is a “lack of mediation between stars and skin” (522). Indeed, just as when the lights and colors of the day at Tipasa are on Camus’ eyelashes, here the stars are directly on Meursault’s face. In both cases, it is as if the world will physically enter into the perceiving subject, breaking down the barrier of the body so that they can be united. This same reading can be applied to this description of Rieux as well. To borrow Deranty’s phrase of a “lack of mediation,” here there is also a lack of mediation between Rieux and the sky. This is apparent in the way that Camus constructs the sentence, as he actually does not indicate whether it is the sky or Rieux who is “plein de lune et d’étoiles” [full of the moon and stars]. Common sense would indicate that we attribute this description to the sky, but now that we are more aware of Camus’ intentions, we cannot be so sure of who he is referring to. Because of this, it seems that this sentence is purposely ambiguous, indicating both Rieux and the sky at the same time, and thus indicating their union. While the sentence starts with Rieux as the subject, as soon as he looks at the sky things begin to blur. The sky is described as “renversé” [overturned], and then after a comma, Camus writes “plein de lune et d’étoiles” [full of the moon and stars]. Had Camus added “et” [and] instead of the comma, it would be clearer that this description relates to the sky. But, in using a comma and no other mark to refer to either Rieux or the sky as the subject, from a grammatical perspective it must be said that he refers to both at the same time. This is quite evident when we consider that if this final part of the sentence had been something like “plein d’un étrange bonheur” [full of a strange happiness], it would immediately be assumed to refer to Rieux. In this way, Camus’ syntax indicates the

oneness of Rieux and the surrounding world at this moment, and shows how one can enter into a state of grace through the body.²³

While Camus' syntax indicates Rieux's connection to the world, the actions that Rieux performs indicate this as well. As noted before, when Rieux is on the beach with Tarrou they see oily reflections due to the rising and falling of the waves. Camus refers to this moving current as the "respiration calme de la mer" [calm breathing of the water] (281). When Rieux is on his back looking at the sky, his next action is to "respir[e] longuement" [breath slowly] (281). This is another step in his process of finding unity with the world, and is reminiscent of Camus' own attempt to match his breathing with the sighs of the world at Tipasa. When Camus does match his breathing with that of the world, this is when he finally feels accomplished and integrated. In a similar way, it seems that Rieux is also trying to match his breathing with the breath of the world. Before they can do this, however, both Camus and Rieux must begin from a position of physical activity – the act of swimming. By starting from this physical activity, they can become graceful bodies and then can find some sort of union with the world – a moment of grace within the terror of the plague. It appears that Rieux does achieve this, as "le souvenir de cette nuit [lui] était doux" [the memory of this night was sweet to him] (282). Of course, these moments cannot last long. This section ends with the thought that "il fallait maintenant recommencer" [it was necessary now to begin again] (282). In the same

²³ The word "renversé" is also key here. I have translated it somewhat liberally as "overturned," as this gives the sense of the contents of the sky spilling out into the sea, as if the sky were an overturned physical object. The most literal translation would have been reversed, which still contains this connotation, although not as strongly.

way that Sisyphus returns to his rock, Rieux and Tarrou must return to Oran and the plague. The difference is that they have left the underworld for an evening, and have rediscovered the sensual joys of the sea and sands of the Mediterranean.²⁴

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have explored the intersections between the body, grace, play, and the absurd. These four topics are of great importance to Camus and relate in many different ways. I have also showed how these topics could be observed and analyzed in Camus' fiction. There are many more opportunities for this type of analysis, and they will raise just as many questions as they answer. This was apparent in my analysis of *La Peste*, as it served as somewhat of a rebuttal to Camus' stance at the end of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, the realization of the absurd is seen as equivalent to the realization that life is a game. And, since games and play allow for and encourage bodily grace, it would seem that one can become graceful in life by being aware of the absurd. However, as *La Peste* shows, sometimes theory does not play out the way it is expected to in reality. Sometimes, it is necessary to escape the absurd to find grace. This is not to say that Camus is wrong in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* – rather, it is to say that the question of how one should live is complex and will have many different answers. Indeed, this is the

²⁴ I have focused on Rieux's union with nature in this passage, but a similar analysis could be done that includes Tarrou. While I have developed the concept of grace particularly as it pertains to a subject in the natural world, the definition could be expanded to include other human beings and the connection that is possible among them.

question that Camus explores and tries to answer in all of his writings. As I have shown in my analysis here, the answers all revolve around the tension between grace and the absurd, which are themselves often connected to play and the body. Indeed, in Camus' two other novels, *L'Étranger* and *La Chute*, both of the main characters fall from a state of grace into the absurd. They respond in different ways, just as Rieux responds in his own unique way in *La Peste*. From these examples, it is clear that Camus sees his novels (and his plays) as an explorative space where he can put characters into absurd situations to see what will happen. In this way, his essays serve as the backdrop for his fiction – they create the stage, his fiction performs.

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