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Spatial Representation in Albert Camus' *Exile and the Kingdom*

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ABSTRACT:

This article focuses on the representation of space in *Exile and the Kingdom*(1957), written by the French author Albert Camus. Set in French-occupied Algeria of the 1950's, the various short stories that comprise the collection are motivated by issues of space and displacement. Camus' emphasis on hybridity and quest converges towards a distinct awareness of what 'home' really means. The first part of the paper discusses Camus' attitude as a Franco-Algerian writer. Then the article makes a selection of stories and analyses the relationship between the protagonists and the types of spaces therein. Finally, the argument focuses on how spatial representations manifest into a form of quest.

Keywords: Albert Camus, colonialism, landscape, 'other', space.

The 'Bogartian adventurer who embodied to perfection the romance of clandestinity - an outsider whose work was a perpetual end game' (Brown, 1980: 132), Albert Camus clearly celebrates the'placeless' Franco-Algerian*pied noir* identity in most of his writings. His collection of short stories, *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957),which foregrounds exile as a recurring motif, underlies Camus' famous comment, 'Yes I have a country —the French language' (*Carnets II*: September 1950).Focusing on the longing for 'home' and the obsessive quest for a fixed domestic space, *Exile and the Kingdom*is largely motivated by problematized spatial representations.

James Caraway points out how 'man's revolt, man's freedom, and man's passion' predominate in the unsettling spatial locales of Camus's writing (1992: 128).Marked by ambiguities and paradoxes, Camus' writing is usually set against a background of racial and political conflict, of bloody brutality which threatens to destroy the homeland, family and friends of the protagonists concerned.In *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus identifies a problematized domestic space which is already on the brink of possible total extinction. Inherent in Camus' theory of absurd, as explained in the pivotal *The Myth of Sisyphus*(1942), is a notion that human beings can never be fully at home in the world they inhabit.

In assessing issues of home and displacement and mapping the various ways in which the protagonists react to such an unstable environment and attempt to make meaning in the face of an often hostile setting, this paper proposes a spatial reading of *Exile and the Kingdom*.Identity dilemmas are therefore translated into the notion of landscape and quest. These spatial *milieux* eventually gather much significance in the mind of the exile and end up as the space of imagination or, to use Gaston Bachelard's term, poetic space. 'We think we know ourselves in time', argues Bachelard, 'when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability' (1958: 8).In *Exile and the Kingdom*, the space which complements displaced memory is the natural landscape, one of the greatest powers of integration of the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind, from which dreams of exile emerge. With reference to Camus, Edward Said states:

> As far as Algeria is concerned, national independence is a formula driven by nothing other than passion. There has never yet been an Algerian nation. As things stand, the Arabs alone do not comprise the whole of Algeria. […] the French of Algeria are also natives, in the strong sense of the word (1994: 216-217).

Camus' spatial vision does not focus on the concrete and the static but on the bodily space of infinite metamorphosis, hence the absurd. Stefan Skrimshire examines this absurd as Camus' ill-

concealed anger and unease towards 'a Europe that had sent its young men to their deaths for something Camus felt they never really understood, leaving in their wake the irrational, arbitrary and frequently cruel nature of the world in its clash with the self that craves for reasons' (2006: 287). Consequently, spatial representations in *Exile and the Kingdom* illustrate Camus' conception of French colonial consciousness caught between Algerian landscape and the imagined *pays natal*, France. The article therefore seeks to emphasize the complex nature of French-Arab relations in colonial Algeria. In a similar context,David Carroll presents Camus's case as 'the locus of a problem' (2007: 8) that is to say, the ambiguity of split identities.

Exile and the Kingdom, which foregrounds Camus's aesthetic grounding of identity conflict, constructs a recurring sense of ambivalence and vulnerability. Qualifying Camus' position on Algerian independence as 'agonizing' (1999: 294), Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter A. Petrakis argue that his writings are infused with a refusal to ignore the complexity of politics as well as the fact that death is not necessarily the outcome of rebellion. The landscape and physical space in *Exile and the Kingdom* relate to 'community, dialogue and responsibility' (Ellison 2008 159) and frequently morph into spatial grounds for interracial amity.

Set in the French-occupied Algeria of the 1950's, *Exile and the Kingdom* incorporates specific historical and cultural references to establish its various narratives and affirm its realism. The overall restlessness of the protagonists, formed by 'the struggle and role-playing associated with the relationship of the self and the other' (Champagne, 2007: 568), enhances the recurring and unstable spatial representations in the short stories.'Home'as a concept is therefore problematized in*Exile and the Kingdom* which distils the traditions, idioms and discursive strategies of France's appropriation of Algeria. It is accurate to say, therefore, that Camus' narratives place severe and ontologically prior claims to Algeria's geography.

Every protagonist in *Exile and the Kingdom* is displaced. Consequently the great desire and nostalgia enunciated here is for 'home', and for the sense of wholeness, authenticity and self-presence founded in a stable geographical location. The stories that comprise *Exile and the Kingdom* stand as a collective narrative of the *pied noir*'s ambivalent sense of solidarity with and difference from the Algerian populace, fury and disgust at what Camus sees as the hypocrisy and self-aggrandisement of the powerful and sympathy for those disenfranchised by it.

On the formal level, the wilderness of the desert space is the locus of Camus' omniscient realist narrative, whereas the chaos and terror of displacement are rendered subjectively. Therefore, *Exile and the Kingdom*is about physically and culturally displaced protagonists whose journeys entwine in a complex spatial network. The singular 'exile' of the title suggests that in fact all the actual journeys undertaken by the protagonists are variations of the search for 'home'.In addition, Skrimshire argues that in Camus's world, 'To exist is to be a stranger to oneself and to the world, and this 'strangeness' is as close as Camus gets to an original position from which any talk of individual or social transformation must begin' (2006: 288).

Camus' protagonists, whose experiences of exile are both exhilarating and alienating,are extremely preoccupied with physical spaces. In the story entitled 'The Adulterous Woman', for example, the female protagonist Janine relates to her exile through significant ceremonies of bonding with the Algerian landscape. Janine, who maps an awareness of her own body as limitation or barrier, typifies the Camusian protagonist. Her spatial awareness of her 'wedged in' marginalized (11) European identity is sharpened with the overwhelming presence of the Arabs 'shrouded in their burnouses' (10), and who 'seemed to have plenty of room, despite their ample garments' (10)collectively form a district contrast to the European body. The often hostile scrutiny of and physical space controlled by the Arabs force Janine into an awareness of her burdensome, 'foreign' physical self.

In this sense, physical space is an attempt to embrace and understand the *pays natal* and thesubject. Like Janine,Yvarsin 'The Silent Men' must overcome his initial revulsion towards the Arab body. The end of exile, the triumph over the estranging sea and desert is only possible when Yvars regainsa bond with the lost body of the native land. Beneath his petty regrets and desire to regain his lost youthful body lies a deeper layer of interpretation and this egocentric attitude must yield to a humble

realization that the bodily discourse of the *pays natal*, Algeria, is the realm of viscous damp where familiar meanings dissolve, of the unspeakable that eludes the systematizing word.

In other words, Janine and Yvars must necessarily merge their physical space with the psychological one if they wish to understand their positions in the landscape better. Janine's almost sexual union with the physical environment, for instance, enacts a new corpus of sensibility and ends with a triumphant vision of sensory plenitude:

> She seemed to recover her roots and the sap again rose in her body, which had ceased trembling […] Then, with unbearable gentleness, the water of night began to fill Janine, drowned the cold, rose gradually from the hidden core of her being and overflowed in wave after wave, rising up even to her mouth full of moans. The next moment the whole sky stretched out over her, fallen on her back on the cold earth. (29)

Similar images of dismemberment and reintegration recur in 'The Silent Men' where Yvars finally accepts the discourse of the Algerian landscape:

> He didn't stir, looking towards the sea where already from one end of the horizon to the other, the twilight was swiftly falling. […] If only he were young again, and Fernande too, they would have gone away, across the sea. (64)

The fantasies of youth and unencumbered bodies experienced by Janine and Yvars are imaginative strategies designed to resist the desecrating force of an oppressive space. Camus deploys a whole aesthetic of incompleteness that offers an insight into a space where forms are unstable and where an intricate branching governs the existence of all things.

'The Guest' is another short story which posits the protagonist Daru who acknowledges a paradoxical relationship with the Algerian landscape. Although he finds life on the high inhospitable plateau quite complicated, he eventually realizes that his existence and homeland are inextricably bound up with it:

> The only ploughing here was to harvest rocks […] Towns sprang up, flourished, then disappeared; men came by, loved one another or fought bitterly, then died. No one in this desert, neither he nor his guest, mattered. And yet, outside this desert neither of them, Daru knew, could have really lived. (74)

Space acquires another dimension in the story entitled 'The Artist at Work'. In an attempt to save his art and his dying artistic talents, Jonas, the artist, is forced to build a little empire for himself way up in the high rooms of his apartment and escape from the landscape. Despite his alienation, this protagonist challenges Franco-Algerian history without dominating or exploiting it. Jonas simply disappears in this hideout and creates his own kingdom within an otherwise suffocating domestic space, for although he must have solitude with which to create, he also needs to go out into the community in order to obtain material to create. Jonas' apartment — which translates into a dislocation of the otherwise unified domestic space of his normal family life — represents a fantastic simplification of the entire universe of Camus' storytelling. Each new solution to the problems that threaten Jonas is reduced to a mere displacement or dislocation within the apartments.

A reminder of the wilder, more primitive landscape outside, the ascent towards the loft or the attic bears the mark of a more tranquil solitude. Jonas' solitude can be a means of escape from solidarity but it is nevertheless the foundation on which fraternity is built. His most significant contribution to humanity at large is not achieved by allowing his privatized spaces— his home, family and vocation—to be overwhelmed by the mass of his admirers, but on the contrary by withdrawing into creative solitude which offers him the fertility of self-knowledge and the inspiration for his painting. This ascent into the attic is a vital acknowledgement of the exile who releases his complex identity to the outside space:

> Jonas listened to the welcome murmur rising from mankind. From such a distance, it did not run counter to that joyful strength within him, his art, these forever silent thoughts he could not express but which set him above all things, in a free and crisp air […] He put out the lamp and, in the darkness that suddenly returned, right there! Wasn't that his star still shining? (115)

Accordingly, the displaced protagonists, who achieve reconciliation within the 'sun-drenched Algerian landscape' (Kulkarni, 1997: 1530), formulate a sensual enjoyment of their complex situation as 'exiles'.

Displacement as Quest:

Despite the varying register of the stories, a kind of restraint predominates, a will not to go beyond the limits of man, to define his place in the transcendent universe as well as in relation to his earthly problems. This restraint makes Camus choose ordinary men who are neither heroes nor saints. V.C. Letemendia maintains that Camus opts for 'the attitude of the rebel, whose political action is limited always by a sense of the sacredness of human life, requiring a constant balance between relative freedom and relative justice (1997: 448)

Spatial quest in Camus' writing indicates a strong sense of boundaries and physical separation. The exiled, disinherited body which simultaneously signifies protection and resource also reflects Camus' attempt to 'resolve this problem of meaning' (Leblanc, 1999: 129). Janine, for example, cherishes the impossible dream of becoming one of the nomads.Since the various races involved in the Algerian landscape are mostly errant and wandering hordes, and none can even make a claim to the master territory, the French Algerian too inherits the millennial Saharan space. Hence, plurimillenial space dissolves the oppressive barriers of colonial space. Arabs and Europeans become identical as they evolve simultaneously in the undisputed territorial open space. Yet, the Arab is not portrayed as a brother-figure but as the major cause of anxiety felt by Janine in the deep heart of the Algerian landscape:

> Above the desert, the silence was as vast as the space. Janine, leaning her whole body against the parapet, was speechless, unable to tear herself away from the void opening before her. (22)

In other words, Janine feels very much removed from home, and the illusion of security in fact effaces itself to reveal the colonizer's vulnerability vis-à-vis the absolute space of the desert landscape. The dominant space— that of wealth and power—endeavours to mould the spaces it dominates but the effect is a boomerang one:

> Yes, all of them had that look of pride; but this one, really, was going too far […] She loathed that Arab's stupid arrogance and suddenly felt unhappy […] the space widened and they rose into an even broader light, cold and dry, in which every sound from the oasis reached them pure and distinct. (20-22).

The Arab crowd, 'free lords of a strange kingdom' (23), spatially expulsed from the coastal regions of their own land, nevertheless creates invisible barriers.The French are flung back into cramped, constructed spaces, the weight of which is unbearable, for example, the 'empty, frigid classroom' (65) in 'The Guest'. Such problematic spaces reflect Daru's fruitless attempts to fraternize with the 'other'. The French protagonist, though attracted to the Algerian landscape and space, is constantly ejected out of that very space like an aborted reject. Daru, epitome of the idealist mind, attempts to reassemble the pieces of a broken 'fraternity', but the element of angst that divides the two sides is much too strong for any real compromise to really occur.

Camus' *Exile and the Kindgom*differentiates between 'ideal' space which has to do with mental and psychological categories, for example, the enclosed speculations of protagonists like Daru, Jonas and Janine, and 'real' space which is the space of social practice. In actuality, each of these two kinds of space involves, underpins and presupposes the other. Natural space is, in fact, the common point of departurein Camusianmemory.

Henri Lefebvre (1974) even goes so far as to argue that it is a culture difference that perhaps occupies the interstices between representations of space. Differences of race and culture, for that matter, isolate d'Arrast from the poor people of Iguape in the story entitled 'The Growing Stone'. Being of European stock, he is automatically identified with the administrative elite in this community which is still marked by its colonial past. However much he may sympathise with the native population, he finds it impossible to enter the spirit of their primitive dance rituals, stumbling in confusion from the native cultural space. Despite the obvious liking he feels for the ship's cook and Socrates, and despite the instinctive attraction the young black girl inspires in him he has to decline Socrates' invitation to remain

with them. His culture forcibly demands his exclusion from native space. His inability to mingle results in a very constrained social space:

> The men and women dancers separated into two concentric circles with the men inside. In the very centre the black leader in the red jacket took his stand. D'Arrast leaned against the wall, folding his arms. (137)

'The Silent Men' provides a very adequate example of the way in which social space is produced through architectural design and how architectural design in itself a way of producing both attempted and abortive communication:

> At that moment the door into the former shop opened in the end wall and M. Lassalle, the boss, stopped on the threshold […] he seemed somewhat embarrassed as he came through the door. His greeting was less sonorous than usual; in any case, no one answered it. The sound of the hammers hesitated, lost the beat, and resumed even louder. (56)

Similarly, the boss slips through the door too quickly to give time to the workers to express their sympathy. The door becomes the 'milieu of prohibition' that Lefebvre discusses. Physically defining the world of the boss and the world of the ordinary worker, the 'already closed' (63) door enacts clearly demarcated social spaces and firmly refuses to make any adjustments. In this respect, the door that separates the two worlds in 'The Silent Men' lays down the law because it implies a certain order and hence also a certain disorder since an adequate level of communication can never be reached. It commands bodies, prescribing and proscribing the gestures that are to be exchanged between boss and worker.

Motivated by a quest for individual freedom (Knapp, 1990: 74), *Exile and the Kingdom*retains a clear distaste for violence and exploitation. Spaces in the above-mentioned work of Camus are a paradoxical combination of boundlessness and restriction, reflecting the personal dilemma of the exile. Divorced from himself and others, he is perpetually aware though of his own existence and nothing prevents him from drawing nearer to his fellowmen in an act of solidarity and love.

'Exile' and 'kingdom' are in fact clearly intertwined—like the two sides of an image that Camus chooses to illustrate the fact that human space is an inseparable combination of joy and sorrow, frustration and fulfilment. The ambiguity in the relationship whereby experience of exile defines the nature of the kingdom and vice-versa is nowhere more apparent in this collection of stories than in the general picture they present of man's place in nature. The world is indifferent, even hostile to the human needs but it is only within the space of nature that the Camusian individual finds an authentic basis on which to build his existence.

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