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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Renaud Camus, *mise en abyme* of the queer political novel

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Abstract

This paper examines Renaud Camus's trilogy (*Roman roi*, *Roman furieux*, *Voyageur en automne*) as a multifaceted literary and theoretical intervention within the framework of a political and queer political novel. The analysis argues that Camus interrogates the intersections of aesthetics, politics and representation, particularly focusing on the notion and dynamics of presence and absence, thus challenging both contemporary queer discourse and dominant political paradigms. The study situates his trilogy within a broader critique of the increasing (de/re) politicisation of French Literature, as Camus's refusal to adhere to progressive norms, which positions him as both an anachronistic and controversial figure. The trilogy offers an alternative approach to the traditional political novel by prioritising ambiguity and the interplay of presence and absence, rather than explicit engagement with overt activism or political movements. Through its narrative exploration of memory, exile and historical and fictional displacement, and by integrating layers of absence, memory gaps and metaphors, the trilogy suggests a novelistic form that critically interrogates the dynamics of political representation (even his own), the very fabric of identity and politics as iterative, metaphorical processes, rather than static linear narratives that draw on memory as a fraught and unstable mechanism for constructing meaning.

Keywords

Renaud Camus, political novel, queer, great replacement, fiction, utopia

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Introduction

Et si volueris adtendere, maxima pars vitae elabiture male agentibus, magna nihil agentibus, tota vita aliud agentibus.

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*

Renaud Camus occupies a polarizing position in contemporary intellectual and cultural discourse. Known for his conservative politics, particularly his *Great Replacement* Theory, and for his earlier literary explorations of gay/queer sexuality, such as *Tricks*, Camus seemed a challenging example in the context of the Queer Political Novel, exemplifying a complex intersection between aesthetics and politics[1]. This complexity is heightened by Camus's own rejection of the terms *homosexual, gay* and *queer* and his introduction of the term "achrian" (*achrien*). This neologism reflects a deliberate alienation from normative and mainstream categorizations, both political and literary.

Camus' extensive bibliography further compounded his reputation. Central to his work is the concept of the global *remplacisme,* first through his most influential book, *The Great Replacement,* which reached its fifth edition in 2019. This controversial theory is further elaborated in works such as *The Small Replacement* (2018), *The Great Deculturation* (2018), *Decivilisation* (2018), and his *227 Proposals of the Non-Candidate* for the 2022 French presidential elections. Beyond these explicitly programmatic texts, Camus's writings delve into broader explorations of culture, language, tradition, travel and the notion of otherness. This thematic focus is also evident in works ranging from travelogues to idiosyncratic explorations, such as the *Directory of Contemporary French Delicacies* (2000), the *Dictionary of Contemporary French Delicacies* (A-H, I-Z, 2021), *Notes on the Manners of Our Times* (1985), and *Syntax or the Other in the Language, Praise of Shame, Low Voice, Praise of the Whisper or the Other in the Voice* (2004). His most well-known contributions to what is called queer literature include *Tricks*, *Elegies for the Few* and *Achrian Chronicles*. His extensive journals[2], spanning themes of linguistic analysis, political displacement, aesthetic theory and everyday life, represent a form of literary engagement that resists traditional categorisation. Works such as *Life of the Dog Horla* (2003) and *The Exhausting Desires for These Things* (1995) further exemplify his prolific output.

Camus's controversial discourses

Camus's controversial political and cultural discourses have often overshadowed his literary contributions, complicating, to say the least, his reception within contemporary queer studies, which tend to align with progressive and left-leaning thought. The difficulty of reconciling Camus's aesthetic and political identities, positions his work as a paradoxical *mise en abyme*, "groundlessness" that situates discourse as a self-reflective structure, a recursive examination of literature and politics as intertwined yet fundamentally destabilising forces.

He is simultaneously overrepresented, particularly as a politically conservative figure whose works have been cited by politicians such as Marine Le Pen, and underrepresented, or arguably outmoded, as a writer. This paradox is particularly striking given Camus's prolific output as a graphomaniac and social media (tweeter) enthusiast. Reflecting on his career, Camus remarked that he gained notoriety twice: once as a pornographer and once as a racist, asserting that on both occasions, his work was fundamentally misinterpreted and misread. Camus is an author whose literary achievements were recognised by Roland Barthes (*Tricks*) and for many years, his work was published by Éditions POL, until they distanced themselves from him due to the controversies surrounding his political writings and ensuing legal battles.

Camus's oeuvre, much like that of Daniel Guérin, polarises his readership into two distinct camps. On one hand, there is the domain of queer literature, a categorisation he openly rejects, and on the other, his political work, most prominently his theory of the "Great Replacement" that advocates for a return to a purportedly "authentic," "pure" European culture, which he claims has been eroded due to migration and a diminished collective attachment to cultural and religious identity. According to Camus, these influences, primarily religious but also cultural and socio-political, threaten European civilisation[3].

Therefore, organising a conference on Renaud Camus as a queer author would be a near impossibility in contemporary France. While he has gained political followers both domestically and in the United States, younger generations within gay and queer communities find little, if any, common ground with him. Moreover, this disconnection is exacerbated by Camus' carefully curated public persona, which embodies a deliberately anachronistic, aristocratic and elitist aesthetic. Inflected with elements of French dandyism, his rhetoric is unapologetically conservative and nationalist, qualities that modern discourses surrounding *woke* and *cancel culture* find particularly discordant, to put it mildly.

Queer and gay literature in contemporary France, at least that which openly identifies as such, is usually aligned within the left political spectrum. While this does not always imply an explicitly leftist orientation, given the nuanced French distinction between *de gauche* and *gauchiste*, there is a noticeable reluctance to engage with voices that historically contributed to this literary tradition, particularly during the 1970s. Camus can be situated within a lineage that includes figures

[1] We studied his works through the lens of the French tradition of discourses on literature, homosexuality, gay/queer identities and political *engagement*. Cf. Maja Vukušić Zorica, *Zatočenici ljubavi: književnost, homoseksualnost, angažman*, see 1.

[2] See: 2.

[3] It is noteworthy that in 2023, a selection of Camus's political writings was published in English in the United States, spanning a concise 266 pages.

such as Marcel Jouhandeau, a conservative Catholic who controversially attributed his "Nazi episode" to his wife, or the now contentious Tony Duvert and the better-known Gabriel Matzneff, both of whom are marred by serious allegations for paedophilia. These authors' reputations have been further scrutinised in recent years because of the growing argument that art does not justify everything. Notably, Virginie Despentes was among the first to challenge the argument, once espoused by figures like André Gide, that Art and History provide carte blanche for all behaviour, asserting that certain boundaries cannot be excused under the guise of artistic licence. Camus, with his layered identity as a writer, fits uneasily within this contested tradition.

So, to return to the Seneca's quote from the beginning, we would like to see if, as an author of political novel is "doing [things] badly" (in French "mal faire"), "doing nothing" for us today as an outdated reference or "doing something else".

The Trilogy: From the reimagined historical novel (*Roman roi* and *Roman furieux*) to metatextual inquiry (*Voyageur en automne*)

For the purposes of this analysis, we selected three Camus' historical novels, published over a span of nine years: *Roman Roi* (*King Roman,* 1983, 3), *Roman Furieux* (*Furious Roman*, 1987, 4), and *Voyageur en automne* (*Traveller in autumn*, 1992, 5). This trilogy can be interpreted as a *mise en abyme* (groundlessness) of the political novel, which spans a thematic arc that shifts from historical-political storytelling to a more introspective and metatextual inquiry offering an exploration of recursive historical and political structures and discourses, and the interplay between personal and collective narratives.

In *Roman Roi*[4], Camus blurs genre boundaries. In French, the title could be interpreted as an elevation of the novel itself to the status of a "king," with a noun and an apposition combination that, according to Camus, is somewhat unconventional in French literary tradition. The second novel, *Roman Furieux*, can also be understood as a "furious novel". However, the title refers to King Roman II, who ruled over the empire of Caronia from 1927 to 1930 and again from 1933 to 1948, who embodies a tragic figure of exile and loss.

The first two novels are written in a relatively classical style, presenting a dense third-person narrative that integrates external focalisation and sparing dialogue, mirroring Camus's preference for detailed spatial descriptions. The travels chronicle the journey of King Roman, who, having lost his kingdom, searches for his place in the world. Roman's journey takes him across Europe before ultimately bringing him to the United States, where he remains connected to the European royal families. Yet, despite these affiliations, he feels increasingly vulnerable at the mercy of powerful nations such as France, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union. His displacement parallels his symbolic alienation from power as his exiled government gradually fades into irrelevance.

Politics pervades these narratives not through the political landscape, which is conveyed through diplomatic and, at times, less diplomatic solutions, as Roman is forced to adapt to both logical and illogical shifts in the world around him but as an undercurrent of personal and diplomatic turmoil. Roman's exile reflects both fractured geopolitics and the existential dislocation of a leader without sovereignty.

The first two novels draw heavily from the *vanity fair* genre, incorporating the elements of journals, travelogues, and court and parliamentary intrigues. They present the character of King Roman primarily through the writings of his loyal secretary Homen, whose role is to document the king's life and write his memoirs. Homen's narrative also reveals much of the king's personal life, particularly regarding Roman's relationship with Lady Diana Landsor, an Englishwoman, and niece of the wife of the U.S. ambassador, Mr. William Olson Everett. Lady Landsor's marriage to Roman becomes a pivotal element in the king's life, representing a collision of two worlds–the old and the new–and a passion that ultimately drives him to madness and confinement in an asylum.

Although Homen questions the meaning and value of his writings in the first two novels, these works do not come close to the level of theoretical or metatextual reflections of Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction[6]. The third novel, however, appears to engage with these issues, raising the question of *parody and intertextuality of history*, reminiscent of the subtitle of Hutcheon's book. *Traveller in autumn* reframes the trilogy introducing a perspective of a nameless "traveller" or "foreigner," French literary scholar of sorts, that arrives in the former Caronia to attend a conference on the writer Hänon. During his visit, he uncovers the works of his presumed predecessor (*Conversations dans la barque des Morts*), Lemka, which sparks a personal quest of his own. Here, the narrative shifts focus from King Roman to themes of historiography, memory, and fictionalisation. Camus uses the traveller's figure to challenge linear interpretations of history, offering a fragmented and recursive model. The Kingdom of King Roman serves as both a literal and metaphorical space, a *mise en abyme*, of Europe's fragmentation and dissolution of shared cultural and political ideals. Therefore, the third novel illuminates the entirety of the trilogy, clarifying its subject, significance and place within Camus's works by interrogating political and cultural representations.

If the first two novels recount the life and downfall of King Roman II of the fictional empire of Caronia, their central preoccupation lies in the symbolic construction of kingship. The role of the king's secretary Homen is crucial. Homen's narration functions as a sort of meta-commentary on the act of biography writing, blending historical verisimilitude with fictionalized elements. Political drama unfolds not through explicit

[4] In a certain moment, Zoltaÿ, the composer that was fascinated by Roman's wife, Lady Diana, composed an opera-oratorio named "Roman-roi" inspired by Atvan (3 on page 443–444).

polemics but as an *elegy* for a vanishing world order. The king himself gradually becomes an emblem of *absence*; his physical exile mirrors his symbolic displacement as a figurehead without a kingdom. The scholar's quest for lost manuscripts and his dialogues with the spectre of his deceased lover Pierre once again emphasises the themes of absence and spectrality. This metafictional turn underscores the trilogy's exploration of literature as a vehicle for political and existential inquiries.

Why the Trilogy might be considered as a *mise en abyme* of the political novel?

This trilogy is political, not because it recounts political, diplomatic, imperial, or court events, or explores various forms of sexuality. Rather, it becomes political in multiple ways, the most evident of which is the way it engages with contemporary concerns that face the hypothesis of everything being political. It also has little to do with the concept of "engagement," transformed today into a whole range of positions that come very close to pure activism.

Camus's trilogy functions politically in the sense that despite the all-encompassing world in which we are immersed, it positions literature as the foundation of politics. This is not because King Roman is merely portrayed as a melancholic, romantic figure lost in a new world without his kingdom, nor because politics within the novels are shaped by the secretary, who crafts an imaginary biography. This biography sets the stage for the politics of the first two novels, not as a mere recounting of the gradual yet inevitable downfall of the king but by establishing the figure of the king not as a person, nor even as a myth, but as an *absence*.

Louis Marin's book *Le Portrait du roi* (*The Portrait of the King*, 1981, 7) explores how the fantasy of a singular body of the king is constructed and how the symbolic violence of his name is exercised and perpetuated, including by the king himself. More significantly, Marin demonstrates how this model interrogates what it seeks to legitimise: the monarch's political authority. He reveals that the absolute power of the king is realised only by becoming an image, that is, by signing his own name. An institution cannot effectively depose itself unless its members continuously rebuild its legitimacy by actively representing it, both internally and externally (Fabre in 8 on page 13). This perspective underscores the inherently political challenge of representation, particularly its relationship with the "opacity" of the sign. This notion becomes political in the context of Roman's kingdom, which exists only as a memory of unreal land that turns out to be a lost utopia from the beginning[5]. Since Thomas More, utopia has been conceived as "one of the regions of discourse, none other than the very text of the text" (8 on page 52).

Marin further argues that "utopia is the space or place, the nonplace of the opposition of opposites by maintaining them as such, as opposites […]. It's considering, in a positive, completely positive way, the imagination and fiction: it is giving to fiction, to the imagination, a properly political function" (8 on page 53).

In this framing, the utopia is inherently dynamic and imaginative, and its vitality lies in its refusal to resolve contradictions. However, Marin emphasises: "An ideology would be the mortification of utopia: it is a way of always reconciling opposites in a synthesis. […] Perhaps any utopia can only be degenerated, leading very quickly to degeneration; perhaps maintaining the activity of utopian fiction is what utopia is!" (8 on page 53).

Therefore, the continual activity of utopian fiction, not its resolution, sustains its political and imaginative significance. Unravelling the mystery of the lost kingdom, the gap between the past and the present gradually confirms that even the mechanisms that kept the idea alive in the King's head were mere fiction from the beginning. Therefore, Roman's representation of the kingdom in exile, shared with others who sustained that idea, constitutes a form of *folie à plusieurs,* a shared delusion in a political sense.

King Roman also contributed to the narrative by trying to write his own story. The fragments he himself writes do not amount to Montaigne's *lopins*, fragments that form an archipelago and embody his writing as emergence, an *écriture du surgissement*. Roman's fragments are merely stuttering that punctuates his inevitable madness and end.

Roman and Homen, two profoundly different men, find themselves displaced, losing the ground beneath their feet as they encounter the "new world", which is not just the United States but also Europe fractured by conflict. Their divergent experiences converge into a shared sense of *acédie*, *torpeur*, *taedium vitae,* weariness, or loathing of life, which has been identified as a hallmark of alienation since Benjamin. Both characters are captivated by memories and traces, striving to salvage what has already been lost. They exist in an artificial world: a government in exile, a king without a kingdom, bereft of land, or people, except for politicians who orbit their displaced existence. A king, a sovereign, is not merely a man; while a man can enjoy personal freedom, he cannot be the author of his own story. This king simultaneously is and is not a king. What is the king without a state? What is the king in exile for his own kingdom? This process of idealisation of principles detached from their context is invariably both sentimental and often bloody. Roman's position in the novel could be described by the Milner's concept of "antiperformative" structure, a potential inversion of Austin's *speech act theory*. Even though Milner uses it to describe the *Gilets jaunes* movement (10 on page 67), this notion aptly describes Roman's position in the novel: as a king without land, living in exile, he is slowly reduced to a shell deprived of any substantive meaning.

Moreover, if, according to Johan Gustav Droysen's claim "Der Staatsmann ist der pratische Historiker" ("A statesman

[5] In his early writings, such as *De la France*, Cioran also develops the utopian and paradoxical idea of the Empire, stating that the modern man finds in it the only refuge that corresponds to his need for space and that it's like "a call to an external solidarity, the vastness of which would both oppress and liberate him" (9 on page 43). Cioran's Empire is feminine in nature (protective like a woman, or a mother, a womb), that must first become Republican (masculine) before it can transition to democracy.

is a historian in practical terms")[6], whether we agree with this claim, it is clear that Roman fails as a stateman while failing as a historian because he cannot see the history in the making. Roman, while completely identifying his own life and persona with the figure of the king, cannot find happiness with the woman he loves, the Lady Diana Landsor[7]. The collision of the worlds is inevitably a disaster in every sense of the word.

Since the 1980s, the French novel has become increasingly politicised, to the point that contemporary politics remind us of Flaubert's narrator, who is described as "invisible and omnipresent". This shift has prompted many authors to produce works critiquing "political literature". By embedding politics into every narrative element, however, the politics themselves implode, as Flaubert describes the path of Bouvard and Pécuchet: they seek knowledge but end up only repeating, distorting, and eventually betraying the very thing they seek to convey.

Against this backdrop, Camus offers a distinctive perspective of a fictional trilogy in which the described "reality" and "history" are considered literary constructs. In *Elegies*, Camus critiques the limitations of all forms of "engagement": "The better [the page], the more it sadistically reminds us of what, in the very moment of its creation, entices us into a form of narrow engagement with the entirety of our sensory experience and its field. […] Absence is the most common, the most normal way of relating to the world – I am tempted to write, our presence" (11 on page 73).

One may try to disentangle the situation by simply saying that the politics here turn into literature and literature turns into politics. But, when Milner explores the interdependence of history and political theory, he warns us: "We could readily conclude that without history, political theory would be empty, while history without politics would be blind. Moreover, the exact opposite could be maintained: the political theory without history is blind, and the history without politics is empty. Only, in any case, we do not yet know what politics is" (12 on page 30).

Camus' trilogy highlights the epistemological uncertainties surrounding politics and its interplay with history. It positions narration, fiction and literature, not a specific political ideology, as the foundation of politics. The king's life is rendered through Homen's literary imagination, suggesting that the act of storytelling itself constitutes a political gesture.

Paradoxically, these novels subvert existing hierarchies, particularly because the first two are firmly embedded in a tradition that is itself a mythical space, one that is perpetually filled anew with retelling. The third part, which we can consider as the epilogue, functions as a commentary "beyond the grave," *d'outre-tombe*. If we are all spectres, *revenants*, how can we exist politically when the world itself is "the beyond," whether in a metaphorical sense or otherwise? From the madness of his king to what he considers the madness of politics, can this trilogy also be read in a different way, the one that raises the question of a particular sexual minority?

Could the Trilogy be considered as a *mise en abyme* of the queer political novel?

These so-called memoirs[8] gradually transform into fiction, or more precisely, into problematic autofiction written by the secretary, which recounts not only the life of the king but also his own. Homen, who's Jewish, follows the King to the United States and *renames* himself Jean and then Nemo. Homen takes his first new name, Jean, to gain some freedom to live as he pleases. As a married man, he encounters men with whom he indulges in sexual activities and becomes Nemo ("Nobody" in Latin). However, this is where the plot thickens: in Camus's novel, there is no mention of a quest for his (lost and found) identity. There is no discourse or reveal and no coming out. This simple fact of not recounting the sexual identity "switch," that is happening as a secondary, and not a crucial plot, is what is bending the possible defining of this trilogy as queer political novels. Even if this fact could be easily explained by the dates of the publication or by the author's will not to indulge in sexual identity discourse, it could be argued that this very fact is forcing us to rethink the genre itself.

Camus's trilogy resists the conventional categorization of the queer political novel. Its "queerness," if there is such a phenomenon that could be identified here, doesn't reside in topics that overtly address sexual politics or identity discourse, but in its aesthetic and theoretical provocations. Camus positions himself by using terminology that was considered derogatory in the 1980s and is now simply inoperable, and not only politically incorrect:

> Sometimes it seems to me that I am the only fag who enjoys the company of other fags, and for whom heterosexuality, in itself, holds no inherent prestige, regardless of whether it is expressed by a potential lover. A more or less liberal, adventurous, frustrated, or intoxicated heterosexual, who might 'permit' me to do this or that, doesn't interest me. I have no desire whatsoever to be 'given' anything, much like in traditional heterosexuality, where one could observe how difficult, unhealthy, and often hostile relationships have become. (13 on page 12)

Nevertheless, Camus paradoxically despises transgression, ranging from Bataille's discourse to more contemporary iterations, positioning himself simply as a conservative who's very well aware of the political and historical weight of the concept of identities, which make him "put himself at odds with his

[6] Johann Gustav Droysen, *Précis de théorie de l'histoire,* Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2002, p. 102 in 12 on page 135.

[7] Lady Diana Landsor is the niece of the wife of the ambassador of the Unites States, Mr. William Olson Everett, whose sister married the count Landsor (3 on page 305; 312).

[8] The first novel opens with a map of Caronia and Roman's family tree in order to suggest the historical and biographical nature of the novels.

contemporaries" (14–16, in French "se mettre en délicatesse avec ses contemporains"), as he explains:

> Delicacies imply indelicacies, indeed; and indelicacies, errors, mistakes, even rudeness, which all implicitly refer to a norm. However, neither the norm nor the fault is a very popular concept these days; and less than elsewhere in the domain of language. We prefer the notion of use, which has the advantage of avoiding substantive judgments, and therefore occasions for annoyance. Usage, nevertheless, has the disadvantage of being purely tautological: everything that is commonly said is said with good reason, if it is usage that is law[14–16].

What, then, could be considered "queer" in this context? The term itself may appear somewhat disingenuous, akin to appropriation, much like omnipresent *globish*. *Quelle horreur!* (irony intended). This is part of a broader trend towards global recognition and marketability, epitomised by certain contemporary figures whose autofictions are ostensibly concerned with themes of shame linked to the omnipresent Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which encapsulates and justifies the repetitive nature of these narratives by the fact that individuals and characters cannot outgrow these phenomena.

On the other hand, Camus is widely regarded as unacceptable in a large part of mainstream contemporary discourse, whether queer or not. Camus's warnings about the disappearance of "us" are pivotal to his critique of modern identity politics. He posits that this disappearance leads inexorably to the erasure of "you" and "them," ultimately dismantling distinctions between natives, foreigners and inhabitants[17] [9]. Without a shared world (from which he excludes especially Muslims), Camus argues that there can be no public space and, consequently, no genuine community of citizens if collective identity is the possibility of representing a human group as the subject of its history, which constitutes the group itself.

If, as some voices convey, Europe has failed to translate economic power into political power, a thought that is repeated more and more today, the concept of *decivilisation* emerges as a key theme: the end of civilisation is marked by the collapse of generational continuity, the cessation of transmission and filiation, and the erosion of the world's "sustainability". In this broader perspective on politics, this dissolution of the political is also linked to the corrosive effects of the multiplication of rights. It supposedly extends to the sense of community and political engagement, as Europe, according to them, increasingly appears to be a universalist receptacle for the identities of others that lacks a coherent civilizational *and* truly coherent political identity beyond its administration and its technocracy.

[9] When talking about the *Gilets jaunes* movement, Milner also addresses the pronouns while pointing out to their misuse in falsely representing *the people* (10 on page 67).

Camus manipulates the boundaries between fiction, nonfiction, and autofiction to construct the political. Our hypothesis is that, within this framework, Camus introduces one of his central patterns that also appears in his achrian works: simultaneous presence and absence. This stance is crucial for the end of *Tricks* and has been revisited multiple times in his *Elegies for the Few*. In the trilogy, this tension between absence and presence, which can also be found in his travelogues and journals, is embodied in the body and its representations, King's body and Homen-Jean-Nemo's body, and is epitomized in the kingdom itself. It is also highlighted in the third novel, where the traveller/narrator, while alone, converses with his deceased lover Pierre, echoing a scene from the *Elegies* during his quest to uncover the lost manuscripts of Lemka. This tension between the elements of that presence-absence stance destabilizes the traditional hierarchy of power, identity and meaning. Therefore, one of the numerous challenges of writing about Camus today is the question that his works raise: Can queerness be considered today beyond identity politics? Camus's rejection of labels and his critique of contemporary queer discourse as overly politicized challenge dominant paradigms of queer literature. By emphasizing aesthetic and textual concerns over identity politics, the trilogy posits a queerness (if one insists on the term) that is both more expansive and more elusive.

Perhaps, and that is not saying much, he could be considered "queerer than queer" in an etymological sense of the word, even if this etymology itself is uncertain. Even though he is considered today, if not as offensive (or racist or xenophobic), at least as peculiar or eccentric, he defines himself, as he stated in his 2022 conference at the Iliade Institute[10], not as a philosopher, nor an intellectual, categories that are highly valued in France, but simply as a writer, implying that literature's sole concern is the text.

Conclusion: on absence and presence as political gestures

> *Il y a de ces instants où mon corps s'illumine… C'est très curieux. J'y vois tout à coup en moi… […] Voyez-vous ces figures vives ? cette géométrie de ma souffrance ? Il y a de ces éclairs qui ressemblent tout à fait à des idées. Ils font comprendre, — d'ici, jusque-là… Et pourtant ils me laissent incertain. Incertain n'est pas le mot… Quand cela va venir, je trouve en moi quelque chose de confus ou de diffus. Il se fait dans mon être des endroits… brumeux, il y a des étendues qui font leur apparition. Alors, je prends dans ma mémoire une question, un problème quelconque… Je m'y enfonce. Je compte des grains de sable… et, tant que je les vois…*
> *— Ma douleur grossissante me force à l'observer. J'y pense ! — je n'attends que mon cri,… et dès que je l'ai entendu — l'objet, le terrible objet, devenant plus petit, et encore plus petit, se dérobe à ma vue intérieure…*
> (Valéry, *La Soirée avec M. Teste, 1919, XXII-XXIII*)

[10] Camus's conference in the Institut Iliade in 2022: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=459828789248861

Camus's trilogy explores the intricate dynamics of presence and absence as central motifs in political and aesthetic dimensions of representation. The novels intertwine historiography, identity and utopia to present a fragmented yet cohesive commentary on Europe's political and cultural landscapes.

Milner highlights a key trajectory within the French novel, observing that "since Flaubert, the French novel has told a perpetual story of mutual porosities" (12 on page 23). This dynamic of boundary-blurring underpins an enduring interplay of blending narrative, history and politics in a uniquely fluid manner. Camus reimagines the political novel, aligning it closer to the poetic gesture of elegy than ideological engagement.

Camus's trilogy operates as an elegy, not only for a vanishing world order but also for the possibility of an unmediated presence. The political dimension lies in its refusal to simplify or resolve the complexities of its narrative. By framing absence as a constitutive element of both art and politics, Camus challenges the reader to confront the void at the centre of the political novel and literature itself.

The elements that could be read as political in these novels, linked to this absence-presence stance, simultaneously point to a broader subject of representation and interpretation. According to Marin, "there's an age of representation: it's not certain that we have left this age" (8 on page 37). He contextualises this tension, noting that representation oscillates between transparency and opacity[11], with signs that fail to signify just one reality, but instead reflect their own internal reflexivity: "thought only works through signs […]. A sign is a representation of representation; it's an idea of an idea". He further notes: "a sign, in its functioning, is present and absent" (8 on page 38).

This notion of opacity highlights how representation does not merely describe but also reflexively interrogates itself, complicating meaning by drawing attention to its constructed nature. In light of this repeated introduction of this absence-presence pattern in his works, as a crucial element of art, Camus underlines the process of metaphorisation, first by the metaphor of King Roman's kingdom, which could be interpreted not only as a metaphor for fragmented European identity but also as a metaphor for tendentious interpretations in contemporary debates on sovereignty and identity. Milner's reflections on metaphor as substitution further illuminate Camus's literary project: "the characteristic of the metaphor is that the substitution of the signification always leaves a trace" (12 on page 116). This dynamic process, where the substituted (*substitué*) insists in the substitute (*substitut*), occurs because the act of substitution retains residual meanings, always anchoring the new representations to the old.

[11] Marin defines opacity as "everything by which the representation, instead of representing something, represents itself as representation, in a movement of return which we often call reflexivity of the representation, this return of the representation by which it designates itself as representation" (8 on page 38).

This metaphor of presence-absence is at the heart of Camus's political novel. His refusal to idealise or simplify history reflects his belief in absence as a key political tool. He invites readers to grapple with fragments of the past, while positioning his "queerness," if one can apply the term to these Novels, as a phenomenon that has to be understood through the lens of both its aesthetic abstraction and its critique of identity's political function. Camus's *achrian* serves as both a metaphor for alienation and a form of aesthetic rebellion, so this "queerness" exists not as a politicised identity but as an expression of ambiguity and theoretical exploration. Once again, there is an empty space that everyone can fill like one chooses.

Thus, the absence is a deliberate political act, rejecting simplistic interpretations of identity, politics and representation. *Les porosités obligent.* These "porosities" highlight the ways that literature collapses boundaries between history, memory and political representation. This metaphor represents not merely physical absence but also symbolic dislocation and the void of political legitimacy. His use of absence aligns with Marin's concept of *opacity* in representation. Here, absence is political as much as it is metaphorical. Milner's analysis complements Camus's approach by explaining how this substitution of meaning operates as both a metaphor and a form of political critique: a trace that cannot be erased (12 on page 116). Thus, identity is already a historical construct with King Roman, and his memory is inevitably a space of dislocation and loss.

This challenge is even greater when the exploration of a utopia intertwines with the critique of representation. The coexistence of opposites that are maintained as such aligns with King Roman's kingdom as an idealised absence, a construct that sustains its political and cultural relevance through fiction and imagination. Therefore, the political and queer in these novels can only point to the gaping void of the definition of the political itself within the novel.

The substitution, the metaphor, as a destabilising force within Camus's novels retains lingering traces of meaning, offering readers insights into the symbolic disintegration of historical and political narratives. Roman's life, governed by metaphorical displacement and historical collapse, mirrors possible manipulations of presence and absence, represented metaphorically through the body, the text and the distinctions between memory, identity and fiction. Roman is both a ruler and relic, a presence that paradoxically signifies absence. Maybe we all are. Valéry mentions flashes of light "that look exactly like ideas" (1919, XXIII). Ideas of people in a dialectic distance from themselves.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

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Ralph J. Poole
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I take this article to be part of a larger project and perhaps a first entryway to positioning Camus's trilogy as ambiguously and contestably queer political novels. Even though Camus repeatedly gets marked as early queer writer (see his 1979 novel *Tricks*) and thus somewhat (out)dated, his irritating reactionary politics make him a fascinating, if paradoxical, object of study when it comes to queerness. It is a timely approach to argue that Camus resists identity-(activist-)based queer discourse, preferring absence, displacement, ambiguity, and opacity instead. His neologism "archrian" could be elaborated further, since this seems to be at the core of his resistance. Additionally, as a queer reader, I am looking for more "queerness" in the article; for example, the particular queerness of the Home character could be highlighted more. Perhaps a stronger inclusion of recent queer theorists (e.g. Muñoz, Halberstam, Ahmed, Sedgwick) would be helpful here. On this note, I am not wholly convinced of the author's own stance on queerness (see passages such as "What, then, could be considered 'queer' in this context? The term itself may appear somewhat disingenuous, akin to appropriation, much like omnipresent g*lobish*. *Queer horreur!* (irony intended)"; or "Perhaps, and that is not saying much, he could be considered 'queerer than queer' in an etymological sense of the word, even if this etymology itself is uncertain"): while skepticism is important, it should be clarified whether queerness is ultimately endorsed as a productive lens to read Camus or whether one should drop the term entirely. A thorough proofreading is recommended; there are some irregularities (e.g., footnotes vs. references) and repetitions (e.g., note 7). All in all, I consider the article very important, timely, and original; it adds to current discussions concerning identity politics and takes a provocative stance (esp. if the writer's position becomes clarified) through a reading of Camus's trilogy. In view of ongoing pushbacks against the LGBTQIA+ community and Camus's reactionary politics, this article contributes to a call for more critical and nuanced reflection on categorical contradictions.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Yes

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the

topic?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Yes

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: queer theory, gender studies, literary and cultural history

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 12 Mar 2026

Maja Vukušić Zorica

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to the reviewer for their careful reading of my manuscript and for the thoughtful attention they devoted to it. I am very appreciative of the time and consideration invested in the evaluation of my work. I would also like to offer a brief apology:

I attempted several times to submit a response through the comment system, as did my colleague and professor Éric Marty, who also wished to leave a positive comment on the article. Unfortunately, we were unable to do so successfully, and I regret any inconvenience this may have caused. By way of clarification, I would like to note that I previously published an article on Renaud Camus's *Journaux* in *Nottingham French Studies* in 2022. https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/nfs.2022.0349?src=recsys&journalCode=nfs In addition, I am the author of a monograph of more than five hundred pages in Croatian, *Prisoners of Love: Literature, Homosexuality and Engagement* (Ljevak, 2022). https://www.ljevak.hr/maja-vukusic-zorica/29333-zatocenici-ljubavi.html This book examines the French literary tradition in relation to the treatment of the phenomenon of homosexuality, beginning with the historical and conceptual problematisation of the term itself and its transformations. It also explores the notion of literary and political "engagement" from the nineteenth century onward, from Balzac to authors such as Gide, Proust, Guérin, Sartre, Genet, Camus, Barthes, Foucault, Duvert, Louis, and William Marx, in

dialogue with philosophers and sociologists including Bourdieu, Foucault, Eribon, Derrida, Lyotard, and Nancy. **Within that book, I devoted extensive analysis to the notion of the *achrien* across Camus's works. For this reason, I chose not to reproduce the entire argument in the present article.** While my monograph also engages with theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, my intention in this article was somewhat different. Here, I wished to foreground a historical perspective, approached through Camus's historical novels, which remain relatively little known in comparison with his journals or essays. My aim was therefore not to privilege a transhistorical framework, but rather to emphasize the historical dimension of the phenomenon as it appears within the specific context of French literary history. Recently, I have also published an article on Roland Barthes in *Revue Roland Barthes*, issue 8: https://roland-barthes.org/la-photo-est-belle-le-garcon-aussi-cela-sera-et-cela-a-ete/ In that article, I sought to demonstrate how Barthes himself may be situated within this same French intellectual and literary tradition. In addition, I have published several open-access articles on Barthes on the Croatian academic portal Hrčak in French and Croatian, including studies devoted to *Journal de deuil* and to the question of mourning and also some to his own perspective on what would now be called the queer tradition (Les Soirées de Paris, Vita Nova, ...). In this respect, I also wished to highlight certain differences between Anglo-Saxon and French approaches to the history and conceptualisation of homosexuality and related terminology. I was concerned that a stronger reliance on contemporary Anglo-Saxon queer theory might obscure this distinction and risk placing the argument within an already familiar theoretical framework, making it appear as one more contribution to the broader field of queer studies rather than as an attempt to examine a very particular historical and literary configuration. At the same time, I would argue that Camus's treatment of what might today be called queerness deserves attention not only in relation to the *Achrien* chronicles but also in works such as *Élégies pour quelques-uns*. In these texts, his sensibility appears closer to that of Proust than to that of many contemporary writers or readers. His elegiac mode may be illuminated, for example, by certain reflections, such as those of Foucault on the significance of departure in defining the lover, or by Barthes's *Soirée de Paris* . Camus's approach is not primarily defined by its contemporaneity, but rather by the particular position he adopts toward the phenomenon he describes, whether one finds that position convincing or not. In this sense, these novels have little in common with the *Achrien* chronicles, or with works such as Dustan's *Dans ma chambre* or Guibert's *Fou de Vincent*. For this reason, my intention was not to render these novels "queerer" than they are. I approach them primarily as a reader, rather than specifically as a queer reader. Camus's characters seem to me to stand closer to those of Proust, align more closely to them than to the voices found in authors such as Rémès, and they differ equally from the tone present in Camus's chronicles written for *Gai Pied*. Finally, I would add that if queerness becomes fixed as a stable notion, it risks turning into a mere label and thus losing its interpretative usefulness, critical and operative. If, however, it retains its provocative and undecidable character, it may continue to reveal both the gaps and the limits inherent in our own modes of reading. In this sense, Camus remains a profoundly ambivalent figure: on the one hand, an peculiar writer of dictionaries of the French language and a lovely book on a dog (!) ; on the other, a deeply troubling political figure. This article was also intended to highlight the ambivalences within his oeuvre, taking into account the historical moment in which the works were written—which is by no means a neutral fact—while at the same time placing them in dialogue with certain contemporary understandings of the concepts and practices of

queerness, as well as with the tradition of the historical novel, precisely in order to emphasise the gap between them rather than to align these notions with present-day interpretations. It is for this reason that this particular approach was adopted.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 08 September 2025

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Dawit Dibekulu
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This research article by Maja Vukušić Zorica analyzes Renaud Camus's trilogy—Roman roi (1983), Roman furieux (1987), and Voyageur en automne (1992)—as a "mise en abyme" (a self-reflective, recursive structure) of the queer political novel. The author positions Camus as a controversial figure in contemporary French literature, known for his early queer-themed works (e.g., Tricks) and later conservative political theories, such as the "Great Replacement." Zorica argues that the trilogy interrogates the intersections of aesthetics, politics, and representation, emphasizing themes of presence and absence to challenge dominant queer discourses and political paradigms. The analysis frames the novels as critiquing the politicization of French literature, with the fictional kingdom of Caronia serving as a metaphor for fragmented European identity, exile, memory, and utopian loss. Drawing on theorists like Louis Marin, Jean-Claude Milner, and Linda Hutcheon, the article explores how the trilogy subverts traditional political novels by prioritizing ambiguity, metafiction, and the instability of identity over explicit activism. It concludes that Camus's work offers a paradoxical "queerness" beyond identity politics, rooted in aesthetic rebellion and the void of representation.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Yes

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Yes

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Literature, Lanaguage

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.