Misinterest

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In 1947, Gallimard published Algerian-French writer Albert Camus’s allegorical novel, *La peste* [*The Plague*]. It would become an important part of Camus’s candidacy for the Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded to him in 1957. While many scholars feel that *The Plague* is not Camus’s best work, its worldwide popularity has made it one of the best-known works of art concerning plagues, rivaling Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Daniel Dafoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and Ingmar Bergman’s film, *The Seventh Seal*.

In Camus’s *The Plague*, a mysterious disease suddenly strikes the town of Oran, whose borders are quickly closed and many of whose residents quickly become ill and die. Through the voices of his protagonists, Dr. Bernard Rieux and journalist-turned-activist Jean Tarrou, Camus shakes his fist at the plague, at the world, at God, and at all who are not adequately outraged, asking how such misery could ever be justified.

But Camus’s novel is not really about a plague. Written in the aftermath of the Second World War, the plague it describes is an allegory for the war, for Nazi atrocities, and for other forms of terror.
What is more, *The Plague* is ultimately concerned not with either a bacillus or a war, but with our moral stance against them. The plague, itself, is a prop for the ethical and existential dilemmas raised by the reality of human suffering and the problem of choosing how and when to fight, whom to spare, and whom to cast aside.

*The Plague* asks: How should we live in a time of terror? Are we permitted to love and to be happy, or must we sacrifice our personal projects for the sake of combatting suffering? Are we permitted to flee, either in body or in mind? And how can we avoid the attitude of Cottard, who embraces the plague as a great equalizer, a crisis that eclipses his crimes and fears?

Camus never answers these questions directly, of course. But his characters and their (often heavy-handed) monologues give us ample clues as to his thoughts. Camus was concerned primarily with what we might call “moral plague”: not with the fact that some people will inevitably die untimely deaths due to disease, neglect, war, crime, poverty, and the like, but with the likelihood that the rest of us will find ways to rationalize this suffering and these deaths.

That our acceptance of the reality of “plague” made us carriers of “plague” was Camus’s greatest concern, and, perhaps, his least convincing moral-philosophical line of argument.

2.

In *The Plague*, Dr. Bernard Rieux leaves his ailing wife in a sanitarium outside the city, while he remains in the town of Oran, tirelessly fighting the plague. Dr. Rieux knows that his efforts are largely futile, for the plague will run its course and take its toll.

He also knows that he must become a partly oppressive solution to the largely oppressive problem of the epidemic. Dr. Rieux must scan citizens for symptoms, must separate ill from well members of families, and must send the infected to make-shift hospitals that resemble concentration camps. He must sacrifice some for the good of others. He and his workers do not
even discuss taking their services into the Arab Quarter, whose residents are ravaged by pestilence and are all but annihilated.

Much of Rieux’s personality is effaced by his work. He loses something profound within himself: his vital spirit or his creative spark, perhaps. One wonders whether this loss permits him to do his job so effectively, to separate and quarantine, to condemn and to heal.

Camus’s *Plague* seeks to remind us that it is when we forget our inevitable susceptibility to “carrying” moral plagues that we become agents and transmitters ourselves. That is, especially in times of plague, we must be vigilantly on guard against our own temptation to seek solace in nihilism, neutrality, indifference, or moral absolutism.

3.

Of course, a part of us longs for plagues, depends on them. Plagues are exciting. Plagues relieve us of daily stresses. Hysterical media coverage and conversations about the terror of the month (from ebola to avian flu to dirty bombs to mass shootings to neo-Nazi rallies) ought to make us aware of the part of us that relishes disaster or the possibility of disaster.

Plagues also offer us the opportunity to feel innocent. The more evil the plague, the more gruesome the terror, the more innocent we feel in voicing our condemnation or opposition.

Plagues, in this sense, become necessary evils, necessary primarily for the maintenance of certain psychological states that have become increasingly common: the state of perennial wariness and victimhood, identification with the oppressed, and the mentality of a survivalist.

We depend upon plagues to give our quest for survival the moral standing we feel it deserves.

Unfortunately, the state of mind that is best suited for surviving plagues, while it may seem attractive when a group of attractive TV characters pull together to slaughter zombies or vampires, is not a state of mind that is particularly conducive to doing the difficult, often tedious work of being, doing, and
relating as whole, active persons in highly complex, political, civil, and interpersonal environments, where problems are not as simple as life or death, good or evil, plague or cure.

When each decision is framed as a matter of survival, when the government itself is presented as an entity that can either save or destroy us, when our popular discourse skips from crisis to crisis, perhaps hoping each time that in vanquishing the present enemy we will vanquish them all, then we know we are not merely in a state of crisis, but in a state of dependency upon crisis.

4.

Contra Camus, it does not help to shake our fist at the world, at humanity, at the government, or at God, asking for an authority to justify or rectify what has been done.

The real “moral plague” that confronts us is one in which we are tempted to lurch from tragedy to tragedy, feeling all the while that there isn’t much a person can do — and perhaps there isn’t — to fight the seemingly unending succession of evils.

We dread becoming identified with victimizers and plague agents, so we decide we must become victims and change agents. We defend against our impotence by indulging in fantasies of omnipotence. We may even create or amplify crises, hoping that, in the new crises, our feelings of helplessness and irrelevance will be replaced with the feeling of aliveness and activity.

Here we must call upon a rudimentary distinction between, on one hand, change as an activity in which things — the self, the group, an institution, a policy, et cetera — are made new or different from what they were, and, on the other hand, change as a component of group identity and a fantasy of omnipotence.

5.

Consider the late Elie Wiesel, who remarked in his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encour-
ages the tormentor, never the tormented. [...] Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe” (quoted in Reilly 2016).

There are at least two remarkable things about this passage. The first is the way that an odd idea—that neutrality is never neutral—is presented as an obvious truth, in no need of explanation or evidence. That this argument is presented in this way tells us something about its psychic meaning: that it is not really intended to be a philosophical claim about neutrality, nor an empirical claim about politics or history.

Instead, the statement expresses an identification with a group, a group for whom the words spoken require no evidence because they are already known and are, therefore, self-evident. While this group may be abstract, and likely consists of multiple overlapping groups, what the large group shares is an identification with the victims of oppression.

The claim, then, that neutrality always helps the oppressor is really a watchword that defines the group organized around identification with the oppressed. This group also conceives of the world as containing only two groups, the oppressors and the oppressed, such that no one is permitted to stand outside or in between.

The second striking aspect of this portion of Wiesel’s speech is his exhortation to make every site of oppression or victimization a momentary “center of the universe.” This notion, that places of violence, trauma, and persecution must become metaphorical centers of the universe, expresses a fantasy about change and victimization that will be elaborated immediately below.

For now, we may describe the fantasy as one in which the group’s victimization becomes “central” to everyone else in the world. Here, the “gravity” of victims’ suffering pulls together all that exists, incorporating all into a single moral universe where everything “revolves” around the victim’s experience, beliefs, and fantasies. This change would indeed be “cosmic”: It would privilege the victim and would demarcate the movements of
both victims and victimizers, while casting to the outer reaches of space those least involved with victimization.

The fantasy suggested by Wiesel's speech is one in which victims stand at the center of a new moral “universe,” pushing and pulling others along prescribed paths, moving and activating all those around them.

If we stay with this metaphor, the activity of the victims implied here is twofold: on one hand, the center does not move but remains stationary, while other objects revolve around it; on the other hand, to the extent that this center has mass, it gradually pulls in and, eventually, consumes everything in its gravitational field.

6.

The difference I am highlighting here is the difference between being the “center of the universe,” on one hand, and being a “center of initiative” (Kohut 1977, 99), on the other. To be the latter is to be a creative and autonomous agent capable of initiating thought, action, and change in the world and, simultaneously, relating to others as separate subjects, external to the self. Placing victimization, persecution, or trauma at the center of a moral universe encourages persons and groups to become, in Cathy Caruth’s words, centers or “site[s] of [shared] trauma” (1995, 11), rather than centers or sites of autonomous being, doing, and relating.

Due to limitations of space, it is impossible here to give a complete accounting of the process by which the valorization of suffering and trauma impedes real change (Bowker 2016). What may be said is that in idealization of victimhood and suffering we find a fantasized hypertrophy and monopolization of subjectivity, such that the victimized person or group envisions itself to be the only vital, active agent in the world.

This grandiose fantasy appears as a “reaction formation” against experiences or convictions of utter powerlessness. The concomitant denial of separateness, reality, and agency to others leaves the person or group in sole possession of the power
to make change, and yet, as Wiesel’s astronomical metaphor reminds us, the central object does not move or change but only induces movement and change in others.

While this fantasy of change offers a kind of hope, it is, in many respects, a deeply conservative fantasy, if we may so speak, for its primary objective is to secure the identification with the victim, rather than to act in ways that make meaningful differences for the self or others. Dedication to this fantasy serves not only to defend against the conviction that the self or group is powerless, but to distract from other threats to the identity of the person or group.

As some readers will know, there are many individuals, families, and organizations who are “addicted” to change of a certain kind: disruptive, chaotic, and superficial change (see, e.g., Kagan and Schlosberg 1989). Crisis, urgency, and turbulence serve, paradoxically, to stabilize such persons or groups: They remain, somehow, in “the center of the storm.” In such cases, “change” both defines the identity of the person or group and distracts from awareness of threatening realities, the most threatening of which is the need for meaningful, substantive, internal change.

Such a situation, then — opposed, as it is, to much of the psychoanalytic enterprise — may be described not merely as “change for change’s sake,” but, more precisely, as change for the sake of not changing. As David Levine suggests in his extraordinary essay, we may understand a good deal of organizational change in terms of a manic state: “manic” in that it relies on a “fantasized identification between a primitive self and its ideal” (1999, 231), and “manic” in the more causal sense of urgent, frenzied, and compulsively-driven activity that defends against contact with what is real in the self, the organization, and the world.

7.

Camus once insisted that “he who has understood reality does not rebel against it, but rejoices in it; in other words, he becomes a conformist” (1956, 156). To be engaged in Camus’s fantasy of
change—to be a “rebel,” which is Camus’s more romantic term for today’s “change agent”—then, requires a misunderstanding of reality that precludes real change.

When we refuse to understand reality, we refuse to understand the psychic meaning of “reality” as a place where others and events exist independently of ourselves. In such a world, there are no boundaries, and therefore, no possibility of relating, communicating, or thinking; only joining or opposing, conspiring or rebelling.

When the fantasy described above is operative, the language used to describe change—its nature, its necessity, its goal—is vague and grandiose, characterized by an urgency and a vigilance that borders on compulsiveness, and features reactive elements more prominently than active ones (i.e., a preoccupation with monitoring and reacting to stimuli that confirm the beliefs and assumptions of the group).

In some cases, the changes demanded are so extreme that they may be understood to be impossible by design. In this case, we can see how the conservative element in the fantasy directly opposes any truly “progressive” activity it purports to undertake: Making impossible demands or insisting upon impossible changes stymies efforts to create real change and, most likely, entrenches resistance and opposition to change. But, of course, failure to achieve change and success in provoking resistance, as discussed above, may well be the unconscious goals embedded in this sort of activity.

Admittedly, the fantasies and realities of change are not so easily distinguishable when faced with the challenges of daily life.

Let us consider something smaller, and, perhaps, more personal.

Camus’s early three-act play *Le malentendu* [*The Misunderstanding*] borrows thematic elements from classical tragedy, alludes explicitly to Gospel narrative, references structural and character elements from the Renaissance *commedia dell’arte*,

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8.
and propels its action in ways reminiscent of situation comedies modernized by Shakespeare but perhaps most familiar to contemporary audiences via televised serials.

The plot of *The Misunderstanding* is rather simple: Jan is a wealthy, married, middle-aged man who, on hearing of his father’s death, returns after twenty years of absence to the small Moravian inn where his mother and sister live and work.

Jan is not immediately recognized by his family, due, in part, to his extended absence and, in part, to his mother’s and sister’s habit of sparing attention to guests whom they intend to rob and murder. Jan also takes care to hide his identity from them, ostensibly in order to gather information about them, to gain “a better notion of what to do to make them happy” (Camus 1958, 84), and to set up a joyful surprise when he eventually reveals himself.

Jan’s ruse is protested by his wife, Maria, who accompanies him but whom he sends away for his first night at the inn. Jan’s mother and sister, Martha, mistaking him for a wealthy solitary traveler, murder him and dump his body in the river before his identity is revealed.

Upon realizing what she has done, his mother drowns herself in the river where she and Martha killed Jan. Martha, now alone and in despair, will hang herself. Maria in agonizing grief, pleads for help and mercy but is heard only by an aged, taciturn servant, who replies, simply: “No.”

Beyond associations with Camus’s absurd philosophy, there are two main “moral” conclusions scholars have derived from the play. The first is that Jan’s quest for recognition, for his identity to be seen and known by his family, is impossible and, thus, is destined to bring disaster.

Jan, on this account, suffers from a sort of Hegelian *hubris*, believing he can be recognized and that his family’s recognition will bring him infinite happiness, erasing the pain of their long estrangement.
Certainly, such an interpretation seems to fit Camus’s philosophical project, which asks us to recognize that our “sin[ful]” desire to know and our “wild longing for clarity” are unfulfillable, impossible, and destructive (1955, 21). To chase after understanding and recognition seems, in some of Camus’s writing, to lead only to violence and death, whereas internalizing the inevitability of failure — as in our fundamental “absurdity” — permits us to survive (see Bowker 2014).

The second, and nearly opposite, interpretation is that the play proclaims the ethical necessity of open dialogue and communication, while condemning silence and obfuscation (see, e.g., Matherne 1971, 74–77; Willhoite 1968, 64–66). This conclusion was advanced by Camus, himself, after the play suffered a poor reception. Camus claimed it was

a play of revolt, perhaps even containing a moral of sincerity. […] If a man wants to be recognized, one need only tell him who he is. If he shuts up or lies, he will die alone, and everything around him is destined for misery. If, on the contrary, he speaks the truth, he will doubtless die, but after having helped himself and others to live. (quoted in Todd 2000, 186)

This extremely facile interpretation, although offered by the author himself, is confounding and perhaps backward, for recognizing a person surely means something other than “tell[ing]” that person “who he is.” In the best of cases, this interpretation would flatten an already bare drama, making The Misunderstanding the simplest of cautionary tales.

Indeed, such an interpretation closely resembles the simplistic conclusion reached by Meursault when Camus places a prototype of the story of The Misunderstanding in L’étranger [The Stranger]. Here, Meursault describes the idea of hiding one’s identity from one’s family as “a joke” (plaisanterie) (Camus 1988, 80). If “nothing distinguishes jokes or jests more from other psychological structures than their double-sidedness or duplicity” (Freud 1960, 213–14), then jokes must always conceal or confound their own expression, must “muddle” their true inten-
tions (Camus 1958, 83), and, in this sense, must always miscom-
municate and must always be misunderstood.

Of the story, Meursault concludes: “On the one hand it wasn’t very likely. On the other, it was perfectly natural. Anyway, I thought the traveler pretty much deserved what he got and that you shouldn’t play games” (Camus 1988, 80). While Meursault is not always the keenest observer of human emotion, he is right that Jan’s gambit is like a joke and a game because it appears to be a species of play, play being a form of creative experimentation where impulses are heeded and where some departures from the rules of reality are tolerated, as in the dramatic medium called the *play*.

It may seem callous to discuss a drama full of violence and tragedy in relation to jokes or games or play. But there is something to be learned in this comparison. First, it reminds us that Jan’s actions express impulses and fantasies that may belong to the periods of life in which playing is of the greatest import: infancy and childhood.

Second, Jan does not play *well*, not only because the consequences of his playing are disastrous, but because he is unable to enact or realize his play in the space between his subjective imagination and his objective interactions with his mother and sister. This makes his playing frustrating and agonizing, to him and to Maria, who strenuously objects to his ruse on precisely these grounds, insisting that “there’s something [...] something morbid about the way you’re doing this” (Camus 1958, 83).

Contrary to the two “moral” conclusions cited above, the real tragedy of *The Misunderstanding* derives from Jan’s unconscious desire to re-experience his family’s misrecognition and neglect, a traumatic experience he suffered years ago, which he re-lives by undertaking an elaborate deception.

One clue about the unconscious motivations of Jan’s actions comes when he describes his ruse as the inevitable result of his “dreams,” by which he seems to mean both dreams experienced
in sleep and hopes of a happy reunion with his family, upon which depends his ability to “find his true place in the world” (1958, 87).

Jan’s dedication to his unlikely “dream” of resolving twenty years of estrangement and psychological suffering by orchestrating a surprise announcement of himself remains strong even as he begins to realize the potentially devastating outcomes of his actions.

This inflexible pursuit of his “dream,” in spite of his family’s clear inability to respond in the way he had hoped, also tells us something about Jan’s unconscious motivations and, therefore, about one of the subtler _malentendus_ in the play.

What really compels Jan to play this trick on his family? Why does he not heed his wife’s advice to announce himself immediately? Maria oversimplifies things, but is not entirely wrong in suggesting that, “on such occasions one says, ‘It’s I,’ and then it’s all plain sailing.”

It is “common sense,” she argues, that “if one wants to be recognized, one starts by telling one’s name. […] Otherwise, by pretending to be what one is not, one simply muddles everything” (Camus 1958, 83).

It would seem sensible for Jan to introduce himself, as Maria instructs him, to say: “I’m your son. This is my wife. I’ve been living with her in a country we both love, a land of endless sunshine beside the sea. But something was lacking there to complete my happiness, and now I feel I need you” (84). But, of course, for Jan, and for Camus, and likely for many others, relating to one’s family is not “so simple as all that” (84).

Jan tells Maria that one of his aims in concealing his identity is to “take this opportunity of seeing [his mother and sister] from the outside” (83), to become informed about how to make his family happy. But it is not clear why Jan should expect his family to be more revealing or honest when standing before a stranger than before a son. Furthermore, to see others “from the outside” by making them naïve about one’s identity risks exposing them to embarrassment, registered by a hidden “eye” (a hidden “I”) of which they are unaware.
Jan’s aim to hide, then reveal, his identity is a type of deception that manipulates the emotions of his family, and perhaps his own emotions as well. Jan has made the family naïve about an important piece of information. To make someone naïve, as in practical jokes, may lead the naïve person to speak or act in a way that is inappropriate, humiliating, or shocking to those privy to the withheld information. The “practical joke,” as it were, is “on” the naïve person because she is not “in” on the joke. The victim of such a joke is “unmasked” when she who once loomed large is revealed to be flawed or ridiculous. As in satire, a portion of the pleasure of joking lies in depicting those who are exalted (erhaben) as vulgar or stupid (Freud 1960, 248).

For Freud, in joking, in satire, and in deceptions, we experiment with aggressive impulses, in which we discover a way to inflict suffering upon others without excessive guilt. More specifically, deceptions and jokes of this nature impose upon their victims experiences resembling the helplessness of childhood (Freud 1960, 280–84): The naïve subject of the joke is exposed in a moment of childlike confusion, ignorance, humiliation, or anxiety, particularly when provoked into losing control or unwittingly transgressing social or moral norms. This aggressive impulse to provoke, then witness, helplessness in others likely arises in connection with the instigator’s own experiences of helplessness, although such experiences are not always consciously recalled. In this way, such deceptions may actually be attempts to transmit painful or traumatic experiences onto others via projective identification, to re-experience them through others, and even to forge renewed connections with others based upon a suffering now shared.

It is important, in the context of The Misunderstanding, to ask how Jan’s family members could be expected to feel after having been seen “from the outside” treating their own son and brother as a perfect stranger, selling him beer and making up his room. Although Jan’s mother is devastated at having taken part in his murder, it is not precisely her killing of Jan that she laments most profoundly. Rather, she is deeply aggrieved by her mistaking of Jan. “When a mother is no longer capable of rec-
ognizing her own son,” she claims, “it’s clear that her role on earth is ended” (Camus 1958, 120). Even had Jan not been murdered, it is certain that his ruse would have succeeded in making his mother’s misrecognition of him all too clear. It seems likely, therefore, that Jan’s aim is not to happily surprise his family by exposing his identity, but to expose his family’s failure to recognize him. Of course, Jan succeeds in exposing this failure, and thereby re-experiences the earlier traumatic instance of this failure, all too well.

II.

Jan’s first line of defense against the idea of openly communicating is to suggest that he has played no part in the deception. When he is “given a glass of beer, against payment,” “received […] without a word,” and “looked at, but [not] seen” (Camus, 1958, 82–83, emphasis in original), he claims to be stunned, deciding only at that moment to remain silent and “let things take their course.”

Maria correctly objects, however, that there is no “thing” to take its course, that, instead, the “thing” to which Jan refers is actually “another of those ideas of yours.” To this comment Jan retorts: “It wasn’t an idea of mine, Maria; it was the force of things” (83).

Jan’s denial of his part in fabricating the deception, a denial of his own free will, suggests that he is once again silenced by his family’s treatment of him, that he finds himself paralyzed, perhaps re-experiencing the moment when his mother sent him off so coldly twenty years before. “My mother didn’t come to kiss me,” Jan recalls, tellingly. “At the time I thought I didn’t care” (82). This withholding of affection, this non-existent farewell by Jan’s mother, involves the rejection of him at a precarious moment of separation, at the very moment when he literally separated himself from his family.

Jan’s mother’s rejection of him at this moment expresses her rejection of him as a separate self, her refusal or inability to relate with him as someone other than a family member. This
event, and what it likely reflects about a pattern of behavior in Jan’s family, appear to have been to some degree traumatic for Jan, not only because of their lasting effects on his emotional life and his inability to be happy, but in the “latency” or delay (Nachträglichkeit) of their impacts: “At the time I thought I didn’t care.”

Jan does not feel that he has a choice. His deception appears to him to be necessary, just as he assigns responsibility for his choices to forces outside of himself. Imagining one’s choices to be necessary consequences of forces outside of the self is one way to misunderstand oneself, to remain unaware of one’s true intentions, and to pursue aims about which one remains unconscious.

Externalizing necessity and responsibility is also common in repetitive and ritualized behavior, particularly that associated with the compulsive element in traumatic repetition: the feeling that one is not in control, that one is “forced” to re-visit a traumatic scene either literally, in dreams, or in obsessive behaviors that express or reflect traumatic material.

While little is offered by Camus on the subject of Jan’s childhood, conversations between his mother and Martha suggest that in his family—as was likely the case in Camus’s own family—one is either “in” or “out.” Even when “in,” of course, one is not recognized as a separate person but merely as a family member.

Incredibly, Jan’s mother fully admits as much, saying she “might have forgotten her daughter [Martha], too,” if Martha hadn’t “kept beside me all these years […] probably that’s why I know she is my daughter” (95).

Martha is only known by her mother, only recognized, because she is literally beside her mother. She is only recognized as a mother’s daughter, not as an individual.

The mother’s rejection of Jan at the moment of his physical departure therefore seems to reflect a dilemma of relating that
predated it, a dilemma in which relatedness with family members across difference or distance was impossible. Faced with such a dilemma, Jan would have had to choose between being absolutely exiled and, in some sense, “dead” to his family, and being permanently “beside” his family only to receive acknowledgment as a family member.

In other words, in such a family as Jan’s, there is no relatedness. Instead, there is a schizoid either/or, whereby one either exists in an immersive co-presence with the family, or, if one attempts separation in any of its forms, one does not exist at all. Once Jan decides to leave his family, he ceases to exist. Thus, for his mother, there was, in some sense, no one there to kiss farewell.

Children raised in conditions similar to these are forced to make a terrible choice at a young age: to identify with a parent’s or the family’s needs and to serve those needs as a family member, or to face emotional exile by heeding the child’s need to explore and discover something authentic and unique within himself (see, e.g., Miller 1997; Winnicott 1965).

Of course, since the child is both physically and emotionally dependent upon the parent and the family, the choice is really no choice at all, as such children must almost instinctively learn to repress not only their needs but their awareness of them, for any outbursts of emotion reflective of their discomfort — for instance, rage at those who demand self-negation, or grief at the loss of self-expression — would only provoke retaliation from the family in the form of further neglect, deprivation, or abandonment.

These dynamics are readily apparent throughout the play, particularly when Jan speaks about his sense of “duty” toward his family (Camus 1958, 84–85), a rather mysterious duty, presumably neglected for twenty years, by which he must now make a conscious effort to procure the family’s “happ[iness]” (84), while at the same time refusing to announce his true identity, and while misrecognizing and repressing his own needs in relation to his family. “I don’t need them,” he insists, “but I realized they may need me” (84).
Jan does admit a desire to “find his true place in the world” (87), and the play asks us to imagine that he strives to establish this place by returning to his family and “making happy those I love. [...] I don’t look any farther” (87). But, of course, Jan’s act of concealing his identity succeeds neither in making his family happy nor in bringing him closer to finding his “true place.” The “true place” Jan seeks is really a regressive experience, an experience meant to substitute for a genuine “place” for himself amidst his family, which he knows to be impossible.

This regressive experience Jan seeks is, in many ways, the opposite of finding a home or a “place,” for he unconsciously desires not to be recognized but to be misrecognized, not to be welcomed but to be rebuffed, not to find joy and reunion but to re-encounter his rage and grief at his unfeeling expulsion from the family.

To understand these claims, we must recall that although Jan has clearly designed his charade in advance, telling Maria that her unexpected presence at the hotel “will upset all [his] plans” (82), when he enters the inn, he says that he “expected a welcome like the prodigal son’s” (83).

Why, we may wonder, would Jan consider playing his trick if he sincerely expected such a joyous reception? Since this is not the sole reference to the story of the prodigal son in the Book of Luke — later, Jan raises the cup of poisoned tea to his lips and calls it “the feast of the returning prodigal” (109) — and since that story is, itself, full of ambivalence, misrecognition, and resentment between members of a family, it is worth a moment to analyze this reference.

In Luke, the prodigal son, having wasted his inheritance “with riotous living,” now in fear of starvation, returns to his father, saying: “I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son” (15:21, KJV). The ashamed son plans to offer himself as a servant to his father’s household, as he feels assured that he no longer deserves recognition even as a member of the family (15:19).
But the prodigal son’s father rejoices that “this my son was dead, and is alive again” (15:24), giving him fine robes and preparing a lavish feast in his honor. Such treatment arouses jealous rage in the elder brother, who complains that, while he has toiled and served beside his father his whole life, he has never been given such gifts nor inspired comparable joy in his father. In reply, the father attempts to reassure the elder son of his indelible membership in the family: “Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine” (15:31).

Jan’s reference to this story and his self-identification as the prodigal son, then, suggest several things about his feelings and intentions regarding his family. Although he has not wasted his family’s fortune on debauchery, he feels ashamed. He is likely aware of the possibility of a negative or unsatisfying reception. He may fear, in particular, the reaction of his sister Martha, who has remained by her mother’s side and, in so doing, has not enjoyed the same freedom, travel, romance, or fortune as he has. He may feel or anticipate guilt at the contrast between his seemingly separate existence and his sister’s lifelong enmeshment with their mother and their home.

Jan’s mother’s treatment of Martha is similar to that of the father toward the elder son in the story of the prodigal: The father’s reply to the elder son does not directly address the elder’s son’s complaint that he has never been “recognized” as special or worth celebrating. Instead, the father offers an erasure of boundaries between the son, the father, and all that belongs to the family: The elder son’s unique self is still overlooked, while, in returning from “the dead,” the prodigal son seems to have found a form of loving recognition.

Like the prodigal son, Jan fears announcing himself and incurring the rejection of his family because he has at least partly internalized his family’s insistence that his separateness is tantamount to his being “dead.” While the prodigal son in Luke feared his own literal death by starvation, if Jan has internalized the equation of separateness with death, then Jan may feel psychically “dead” while separated from his family. Unlike the
prodigal son however, Jan cannot bring himself to announce that he has returned. He cannot make himself “alive again.”

Jan says he expected a welcome like the prodigal son’s, but his ruse assures that he will receive exactly what the prodigal son feared: an experience of indifference from the family and treatment as an outsider.

Indeed, after Jan’s mother admits she “might have forgotten her daughter” had she left her side, she adds, “if a son came here, he’d find exactly what an ordinary guest can count on: amiable indifference, no more and no less” (Camus 1958, 96).

Just as the prodigal son imagines that he may be forced to take on the identity of a servant to the family, rather than being a member of the family, Jan assumes a second identity when he pretends to be a mere lodger. Both a servant and a lodger can be expected to elicit, if not indifference, something far less than familial intimacy. As in the prodigal son’s offer to make himself a servant in penance for his sins, Jan seems to heap emotional punishment upon himself by pretending to be a mere stranger.

According to Jan, his desire to return home is derived from the fact that, in his separation from the family, he and his family have been lost or dead to each other. He desires to revive his connection, however, with a family that offers only self-occluding family membership or nothing. While he pretends to seek recognition from and a mature relationship with his family, he must be at least partly aware that his family is incapable of recognizing and relating with him as a separate self.

Thus, if he does seek to revive a relationship with his family, it can only be one based on immediate presence, family membership, and de-subjectified reunion. In this light, it is a matter of some importance that Maria offers him a more profound and more complete loving recognition of his self. “I’ve always loved everything about you, even what I didn’t understand, and I know that really I wouldn’t wish you to be other than who you are” (85). Tragically, Jan forsakes this apparently mature, loving
relationship to re-enact a drama of silence, loss, and death with his family.

To summarize:

Jan’s odd yet carefully crafted deception permits him to re-experience something of his original rage and grief while inflicting pain and humiliation upon his family.

At the same time, he protects himself from the possibility of further trauma and protects his family from his resentment and anger.

He pursues his deception in a way that leaves his family a way out, an absolution from responsibility for this instance of misrecognition, since it is, after all, his deception and not their hateful indifference that misleads them this time.

His ruse, therefore, partly protects his mother and sister, which expresses an underlying identification with his family, with those who abandoned him, rather than with his self, which felt and which continues to feel abandoned.

Indeed, it is fair to say that Jan, rather than being able to make himself “alive again” before his family, has made himself a stranger to them, which suggests that his action may also express his desire to take responsibility for the loss associated with separation.

Jan’s deception allows him to hold on to his conscious estimations of his feelings and intentions — that he is happy, that he does not “need” his family, and that he wishes to make his family happy — along with his unrealistic hope for a loving reception by his family.

It permits him to safely recall an otherwise dangerous and anxiety-provoking rage and grief while “muddling” those feelings with the pretenses of his ruse.

It permits him to internalize responsibility for his family’s rejection of him while protecting his family from the punchline of his joke, as it were.

Perhaps most importantly, it succeeds in replaying the very experience that he both dreads and needs, the experience that set him apart from his family for twenty years, the experience of
standing before his family as a separate person and being unrec-
ognized, unseen, unknown.

By repeating this traumatic experience, Jan finds a way to
identify with his family and their extreme demand that one ei-
ther belong or die, that one be in or out.

Jan, therefore, seems to seek, and to find, not loving recogni-
tion for himself, but only a “morbid” repetition of a traumatic
experience from his past.