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## Of Women and Arabs: Sexual and Racial Polarization in Camus

Louise K. Horowitz

That Albert Camus systematically excluded—one is tempted to say eradicated—both women and the colonial Arab population of North Africa from his work is a literary fact. Yet, traditionally, to call attention to that fact is to make a political statement, and, in particular, to risk being branded as the very type of left-wing intellectual ostensibly abhorred by Camus. Even those Western critics who pinpoint the racial foundation of Camus's fiction ultimately retreat into apologetic statements for having revealed the all too obvious. Thus, Renée Quinn, in an article entitled "Le thème racial dans *L'Étranger*," signals a retreat at the end of that study: "Sans prétendre, bien entendu, épuiser la signification de *L'Étranger* par cette interprétation, on peut penser qu'elle lui apporte une dimension supplémentaire."<sup>1</sup>

For one decade (not surprisingly the 1960s), analysis of Camus's work in a political light did occur. In January, 1961, *France-Observateur* published two comments—one by Henri Kréa, the other by Pierre Nora—which emphasized the racial underpinnings of *L'Étranger*. Both these studies focused on Camus's own racial insecurities and fears, on the concealed anxieties of the white lower class of Algeria, which, according to Kréa, Camus never psychologically left. In 1969, Renée Quinn's study appeared, leaning on the *France-Observateur* assessments, yet unwilling or unable to assume wholly the potent, if disturbing, revelations. Finally, in 1970, Conor Cruise O'Brien published his study of Camus, exposing dramatically the racial core of Camus's fiction, but this volume has ostensibly failed to convince many Western critics. The proceedings from a major conference on Camus, for example, held at the University of Florida in 1980, include no analyses specifically along these lines.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, Camus's own voice has eclipsed those of his detractors, and we have modeled our criticism of *L'Étranger* on what the author himself stated in the 1955 school edition: "le seul Christ que nous méritons," etc. Why this should be the case is not entirely clear. We don't read Corneille's plays according to his own belated *Examens*, except insofar as to point out certain silences therein. It would appear that a generation of critics has adopted Camus's voice, for it offers a comforting, if unconscious, parallel with their own experience. My intent here is to continue and expand the evaluations of the above mentioned critics, reading the text of Camus (but *not* Camus!) in the light of racial and sexual motivations, which together form one discourse of repression, however "silent" it may be.<sup>3</sup>

That there are critics who have seen the "heart of darkness" and retreated from it, is obvious from the work of Brian Fitch and Philip Thody.<sup>4</sup> As the citation from Renée Quinn's article confirms, however, one need not abandon racial and sexual motives in favor of the "sun" (as

Fitch does to explain Meursault's murder of the Arab), to seek a pull-back from uncomfortable revelations gleaned not by interpretation, not by exegesis, but merely by contemplating the plot, the story line. Thus, the critic proposes that the racial cast apparent in Camus's writing is only one aspect, supplementary to the more fundamental "human" concerns that writing purportedly conveys. But one errs in this conclusion, for the so-called human predicament involved, that which has allowed multifold readers to refer to Meursault as a "brother," is ultimately highly restrictive, its "universality" limited to the Occidental male, perhaps to the adolescent fantasies of that reader, and the sociological explanation which Fitch himself calls for in his effort to grasp the popularity of Camus in the United States, is possibly to be found here.<sup>5</sup> The question is not whether a condition of solitude and alienation has implications for the whole of the human race: that, at least, is a cherished Western belief. And alienation *per se* need not be gender typed. At issue here, however, is whether Camus's formulation of the Absurd is not, contrary to popular thought, rooted in a very particular experience, whose roots are at once misogynist (if not homoerotic) and racial.

The intention of Camus in depicting certain situations, and thus the question of the author's identification with his characters, is nigh impossible to resolve. To conclude in favor of authorial identification with the protagonists (indeed, even to suspect it) leads to queasy moral problems for the readership. Perhaps that is why so many critics focus on the more abstract writing which proliferates in these works, on the metaphysical, rather than the physical domain. The "radical" critic, on the other hand, either Western or Arab or feminist, will focus precisely on the physical dimension—in the case of Meursault, on his curious indifference to various brutalities—and accuse Camus of complicity, subconscious or conscious, in allowing the book's second half to move away from that reality. Whereas the majority of readers will see the failure to refer to the Arab's murder in the novel's second half as the result of Meursault's "solar" conditioning, which thus absolves him of premeditated intent to kill, other readers will come to see in such silence Camus's own (one that foreshadows no doubt the ambivalent positions he assumed concerning the Algerian revolution), a silence that is thereby a sort of hegemony-in-narrative. The sleight of hand accorded the murder of the Arab throughout the second half is seen as Camus's own dismissal of the murder and preceding violence. Thus, we remain polarized, asked either not to condemn this writing as racially and sexually exploitative (for in this view such issues are secondary to the major "humanistic" ones), or to believe that Camus was a saboteur, presenting in *La Peste*, for example, a sanitized colonial fiction at the expense of a troubled and troubling colonial reality.<sup>6</sup>

The fact of the matter is that one need not evade or condemn. The eradication of women and Arabs from Camus's work can neither be denied, nor explained away ("it was the sun"), nor seen as a colonial lapsus. Camus has placed in his work men who reflect a collective attitude or mentality of sexual and racial fear and ill concealed desire for degradation. He himself calls attention to these issues, often in the early pages of his works, and only subsequently allows us to dismiss them, thereby

encouraging our participation—but without our being made aware of it—in the exploitative situation at hand. That the “human” dimension—be it fear of death, solitude, alienation from the social unit—comes to dominate in the discussion of these works is only a reflection of how such discourse inevitably detracts from other textual realities.

*Caligula* is perhaps the most obvious example of how fear of the female is submerged in favor of abstract discussion concerning death and the limits of human happiness. The incestuous experience with Drusilla (reflecting the traditional patriarchal sexual assumptions inherent to such an act), the bloody moon-female figure converted by Caligula as a sign of the Impossible, yet ultimately rejected in favor of a pure auto-erotic experience (“Vivre, c’est le contraire d’aimer”), the toe-nail polishing episodes, the ballet dancer episode replete with tutu, the Venus episode, all point to a figure less concerned with abstract absolutes than with vaguely delineated, adolescent fears of the female (except, of course, when sexual acts may occur “en famille,” the sister a clear stand-in for the mother, with Caesonia functioning as another double of the matriarchal figure). Claude Treil has observed that for Caligula, “amour-mort équivaut à sexualité-chasteté.”<sup>7</sup> Fears of establishing a clear male identity lead to fantasies of pure solitude unspoiled by the bitter odors of lovemaking, and lead also to transvestism. The earliest versions of the play, from the late 1930s, more sharply depict these preoccupations, and the female-fearing, even homosexual theme is there readily apparent (although I believe it is visible in the later version as well).

For Meursault, too, violence is sexually conditioned, and here is doubled by racial motivation. The semi-abusive relationship with his mother, which culminates, as psychologically oriented critics have seen, in the beach attack on the Arab is linked to the murder additionally by the brutality against “la Mauresque.” In the episode involving Raymond’s prostitute, the double roots of racial and sexual violence find a voice. (The term “Mauresque,” moreover, is not so much here a slight to the Arab world, as Quinn and O’Brien and others have suggested, a mildly derogatory term, but, in my opinion, is a linguistic mask for the Occidental reader, for whom the term would have precisely the opposite connotation than it would for an Arab, i.e., an almost Baudelairean, exotic overtone, which dilutes the racial prejudice inherent to the word.) In this light, justifying Meursault’s “innocence” can occur only if the reader, too, experiences a diminished sense of guilt regarding the manifest brutalities of the novel, just as Meursault does, just as the court does, condemning him for matricide and patricide. (These are implied here, perhaps, as elsewhere in Camus’s works, although I am sure with his conscious intent, given that such symbolism is scarcely subtle. In fact, however, it is not a mother or father who is killed here, but an Arab stranger.)

In *La Peste*, the banishing of both women and Arabs from the text contrasts strongly with the statements in the book’s early pages, where the poor relationships between men and women are discussed and condemned, and the deplorable living conditions of the Arab population are discussed prominently by Rambert and Rieux, never, however, to be brought up again. The effective elimination of women and Arabs should

become essential to the novel, given the arrival of the prominently punishing plague, and following the preliminary revelations of acute social disharmony. And in a way, that is what occurs, but only subliminally, for such discord is never mentioned again directly. Exploitation as an apparent theme is textually banished, just as it is repressed by readers for whom such concerns are layered over by a bonding of Occidental brotherhood. The signs are prominent, laid forth in the book's early pages, yet they are consumed by a textual apparatus which parallels a pre-existing reader willingness, subconscious no doubt, to dismiss. The apparent silence on racial and sexual issues in the remainder of *La Peste* is thus the sole commentary on the indictments posed in the early pages, just as in *L'Etranger*, the silences of the book's second half point the way to grasping the nature of Meursault's acts.

Ultimately, in Camus, pronouncements of a highly universal nature result from highly *specific* experiences. Male protagonists are subject to disquieting reactions linked to sexual and racial antipathy and fear, which then give rise to ostensibly general conclusions on the condition of all mankind. Brian Fitch has said that to focus on the murder of the Arab, or on the brutal victimization of the Arab prostitute, is to offer "une explication partielle," by which, despite disclaimers, he means "partiale" as well.<sup>8</sup> My contention is that the discovery of the Absurd, as it is conveyed in the works under consideration here, is a restrictive experience, whose universality exists solely in the minds of those able and willing to participate in the unspoken, but nonetheless screamingly apparent premises of the works. Nothing need be at work other than collective conditioning, so visible in Meursault himself, but this is sufficiently damning. The physical basis for the cherished metaphysical discussion is so polarized as to exclude all but Occidental males, reflecting both real and fantasized power structures, the very ones which Jean Genet exposed in his theater.

In an absorbing and perceptive article, Anthony Rizzuto has claimed "progress" on the part of Camus, gleaned from study of his later works, notably *L'Exil et le Royaume* and *La Chute*. Attempting to shore up Camus's reputation in a consciousness-raised era, Rizzuto reveals what he believes is an increasing self-awareness on Camus's part which leads him to select a female protagonist in "La Femme adultère," and to focus on guilt over the woman's suicidal plunge—as symbolic of Clamence's generalized guilt for his exploitation of women—in *La Chute*.<sup>9</sup> *La Chute* is complex, but I think the blatantly ironic tone goes a long way toward diminishing the idea of new-found understanding. The concealed "secrets" of the earlier works suddenly surface in *La Chute* to become revealed "secrets." But Clamence's bitterly sardonic voice negates these revelations, which Camus dangles tantalizingly before us, refusing them, however, their grave implications. The mood of *La Chute* is summarized in Clamence's regret concerning the black slave trade: "On ne cachait pas son jeu en ce temps-là." Revealed, the secret, which is nostalgia for permissible and sanctioned domination (if not oppression), is nonetheless never canceled.

In "La Femme adultère," Janine is searching primarily for male

desire and approval—be it from her husband, from the French soldier whose earliest contact is via the oral experience of a lozenge offered and accepted (but who then fails to notice her later on), or the solitary Arab figure before whom she and her husband tremble, or all the Arabs who figure as a shadowy mass throughout the tale. Sexual status and reflection remain intact, freed from the brutalities of the earlier works, but nonetheless constant. For Rizzuto, the claim to sex and therefore to life inherent to this tale demonstrates a “new” Camus who had discovered the limitations of self-love and male bonding, the latter a plural reflection of the former.<sup>10</sup> Whereas it is true that the life force is given a standing in “La Femme adultère” which it was denied in *Caligula*, the stereotyping of such desire severely curtails the claim for heightened awareness.

In fact, “La Femme adultère,” may clarify better than any other work the powerful sexual and racial myths of Camus’s earlier fiction. If he selected a female protagonist, it was to avoid the homosexual thrust which would otherwise color the tale. The Arabs in “La Femme adultère” are an erotic mass, so powerfully attractive that for once they have the same value as the French officer, the very symbol of the colonial power structure. The sexualizing of the Arab is a prominent factor in Camus’s writing: he banishes the Arab and the woman together, brutalizes them, rapes them, or executes them, for each stands as a disruptor to the narcissistic stance of Western man, alone or in groups.<sup>11</sup> The erotic potential of women in Camus’s writings, and of Arabs, conforms perfectly to the myths of Western male society: female and native sexuality seen as primitive, intense, destabilizing, destructive, a double cause for “fall.” These are, I believe, the myths at work in Faulkner, too, and herein lies Camus’s fascination with the American writer.

Of course, it takes no great perception to realize that women and Arabs fare poorly in *L’Etranger*, or that the Oran described in the early part of *La Peste* bares little resemblance to the colonial reality of the 1940s. We are, however, made to believe that the myth and symbols created here can be sustained only by the abstractions generated by this reality. Since *La Peste* is ostensibly a parable of war, of World War II, and hence a European novel, it is acceptable that the Arab population be banished, and that the entire colonial system cease to function textually. But why, then, situate the book in Algeria? Since *L’Etranger* is a parable on modern man’s isolation from the social unit, it is fitting that Meursault’s “innocence” be maintained. Yet, for it to be not only maintained, but accepted, the Arab and female victims must be seen not as victims, but as inevitable and necessary losers in a bitter social struggle. Stephen D. Ross, in his book, *Literature and Philosophy. An analysis of the philosophical novel*, ponders how so many readers have confronted *L’Etranger* without reacting *morally* to the murder of the Arab.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, there are other troubling aspects to Meursault’s character. His willingness to participate in brutal acts (for one cannot forget the easy accommodation he makes to Raymond’s requests) is not the only questionable sign. Rather, his rejection of the whole feminine world, his assumptions concerning that world (Raymond is, after all, a pimp; Meursault disparages marriage and more than that, women’s emotional values, and says so explicitly as he returns to

the beach for the second and fatal encounter), are also central to his character. Such behavior testifies to a mentality that is misogynist in the extreme, just as his racial fears, unspoken but paramount in the text, convey the colonial insecurity which was particularly strong in Algeria during and following the worldwide Depression.<sup>13</sup>

Critics and readers have bypassed these central points to focus on the moralistic considerations which come prominently into play in the novel's second half. Indeed, the brotherhood our society has been ready to confer on Meursault can only confirm that his "liberation" was one deeply shared by large segments of the Western world. Camus offers his readers two texts, and it is the second, the metaphysical voice, which allows the other to be canceled and repressed, a remarkable fact given the all too evident "signs" of discord which the author himself displays in his fiction.

Persisting in seeing Camus as the expressor of modern liberal, human values denies the narcissistic and both sexually and racially polarized sides of his protagonists. In eliminating in the second part of *L'Étranger*, any reference to Meursault's sexual and racial violence, in failing throughout the novel to give introspective voice to the very fears which by necessity are hidden in these acts, Camus textually parallels the ongoing reader reaction, it too prepared, at least subconsciously, to focus on the encompassing "humanistic" text, prepared to repress the fears lying underneath the claims of the individual spirit. This metaphysical text becomes the means for Meursault, and for Camus's readers, to deny (without even having to deny) the subliminal currents flowing underneath. That the discovery of the Absurd should reveal itself, ultimately, as partial is perhaps a saddening experience; it cannot be denied, however, once there is recognition that the Absurd, in this body of literature, functions as yet one more discourse of repression.<sup>14</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Renée Quinn, "Le thème racial dans *L'Étranger*," *La Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 69, no. 6, nov.-déc. 1969, p. 1013.
2. Henri Kréa, "Le malentendu algérien," p. 16, and Pierre Nora, "Pour une autre explication de *L'Étranger*," pp. 16-17, *France-Observateur*, 5 janv. 1961; Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus of Europe and Africa* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970); Raymond Gay-Crosier, ed., *Albert Camus 1980* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1980). According to C. Roland Wagner in his article, "The Silence of *The Stranger*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 16, no. 1, Spring 1970, pp. 27-40, the first decade following publication of *L'Étranger* also witnessed a denigrating critical portrait of Meursault which was inconsistent with the theme Camus had expressed in April 1937 in the *Carnets* "of opposition between the sincere individual and an uncomprehending society" (p. 28). According to Wagner, Camus "corrected" this deprecating critical response in the *Avant-propos* to the 1955 school edition, where he stressed that "it is Meursault's 'innocence' and sincerity that leads him astray, not murderous wishes" (p. 29).

3. I have selected certain major, representative works by Camus to illustrate my thesis, believing that the pattern holds for other pieces by him as well, which, however, serve to confirm, rather than extend my analysis.
4. See especially Fitch's "*L'Etranger*" d'Albert Camus (Paris: Larousse, 1972).

The most intriguingly elaborate example of the simultaneous pinpointing of and withdrawal from a "racialist" interpretation occurs in Philip Thody's article, "Camus's *L'Etranger* revisited," *The Critical Quarterly*, 21, no. 2, Summer 1979, pp. 61-69. States Thody: "For what actually happens in *L'Etranger*, when seen from the standpoint of the Arabs, is a peculiarly unpleasant example of both racist and sexual exploitation" (p. 62). He goes on to include numerous examples of such exploitation in the text and even "wonders why critics should have taken so long to point them out" (p. 62). Thody, however, concludes that the "racialist" interpretation of *L'Etranger* was occasioned only because Camus himself, particularly in his preface to the 1955 school edition, insisted on a "moral" reading of *L'Etranger*, and his critics then attacked him for the unrealistically "high" tone he had adopted. Thody is unable to accept—although he signals the possibility—that in Meursault, Camus may have fashioned a representatively prejudiced and hostile lower-class white male, for, according to Thody, Camus never stated anywhere that *he* viewed Meursault in this light! Thody's rejection of what he sees, and which inspires horror in him, finally turns on an *ad hominem* attack on Kréa, Nora, and O'Brien, as he accuses them of "racialist" obsessions. He concludes that "it was only when the happy pagans celebrated in the pages of *Noces* became the shock troops of the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète, a violently racist body devoted to keeping Algeria French at all costs, that critics inspired by an equal and opposite intolerance pointed out features of Camus's work which nobody had noticed before" (p. 68). Thody's article shows how high the stakes were and are for certain critics in maintaining a "pure" Camus.

5. Much is to be learned, indirectly, on the American fascination with Camus from reading Leslie Fiedler's studies on the American novel. In "The Failure of Sentiment and the Evasion of Love," published in *Love and Death in the American novel* (New York: Criterion, 1960), pp. 329-369, Fiedler portrays the hero of a particular strain of misogynist fiction, which he labels the homoerotic fable—from Cooper up through Hemingway and Salinger—as a "pariah," an alienated "Stranger," "a disaffected child of the reigning race and class . . . a renegade from respectability and belongingness" (pp. 356, 357, 358). Significantly, Fiedler attempts to link this body of literature to the unconscious longings of its readership: "What is hard to understand at first is why middle-class readers were not appalled at the implications of the homoerotic fable, opposed as it is to almost everything in which middle-class society pretends to believe. Only by assuming an unconscious marginal rejection of the values of that society can we come to terms with its glorification of a long line of heroes in flight from women and love" (p. 345). Viewed in this light, Camus's work would have struck a responsive chord among American readers, long seduced by the fantasies expressed through homoerotic American fiction.
6. Aside from Conor Cruise O'Brien's study, the best exposure of this critical view is in B. Jakobiak's article, "Camus le colonisateur sublimé," *Souffles*, 3, no. 12, 4e trimestre 1968, pp. 22-28. Jakobiak brilliantly analyzes the numerous "false" positions in *La Peste* concerning the reality of colonial Oran in the 1940s. He believes that Camus deliberately refused to expose the scandal of colonial Algeria, "allié en réalité d'un système qu'il ne veut pas remettre en cause" (p. 25).



It is not my intent here to explore the biographical issues related to the question of sexual and racial polarization in the literature. I believe that we may more successfully discuss potentially controversial issues if we limit ourselves to what is, after all, most relevant—the texts—and leave the man who was Albert Camus alone. What interests me here is Camus's orchestration of racial and sexual motivations in the fabric of his fiction, so that they are at once concealed and revealed.

7. Claude Treil, *L'Indifférence dans l'oeuvre d'Albert Camus* (Sherbrooke, Quebec: Editions Cosmos, 1971), p. 132.
8. Fitch, "*L'Etranger* d'Albert Camus," pp. 32, 36.
9. Anthony Rizzuto, "Camus and a Society Without Women," *Modern Language Studies*, 13, no. 1, Winter 1983, pp. 3-14.
10. The view of a "reformed" Camus (and of a "reformed" Meursault in part two of *L'Etranger*) is also held by English Showalter, Jr., in his revealing study, *Exiles and Strangers: A Reading of Camus's "Exile and the Kingdom"* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984). See especially ch. 8, "Camus's Last Words."
11. I believe that a close analysis of the passage describing the attack on the Arab in *L'Etranger* reveals an act that is as much a rape as a murder. Psychologically oriented critics have detected in Camus's description of the murder a "release" closer to orgasm than to killing: the penetration of the Arab's body by the bullets sustains this view. Of course, the implications here are double, for a rape-like act in this instance would have homosexual overtones, although not exclusively, given the prior attack on the Arab girl, given the identification, particularly concerning the sun, with the mother's funeral, and given especially the overall feminizing of the Arab in *L'Etranger* and in much of Camus's early writing.
12. Stephen D. Ross, *Literature and Philosophy. An Analysis of the philosophical novel* (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1969), p. 187. Brian Fitch signals this important comment by Ross on p. 106 of "*L'Etranger* d'Albert Camus," without, however, subscribing to it.
13. Patrick McCarthy has done a masterful job of detailing the fears and insecurities of both the colonized Arab population and the petty bourgeois of European stock during the Depression, in ch. 2 of his study, *Camus* (New York: Random House, 1982).
14. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Colloquium on Twentieth-Century French Literature (Graduate Center, CUNY, October 6-7, 1983).