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THE SILENCE OF *THE STRANGER*

C. Roland Wagner

I believe in justice but I will defend my mother before justice.[1]

—Camus (1957)

ALTHOUGH *The Stranger* now seems to be generally accepted as a minor classic of the alienated soul, there is a good deal of uncertainty and disagreement about its meaning. It undoubtedly communicates a modern *experience:* the awareness of radical discrepancy between the social world and the true self, the sense of the emptiness of symbolic acts that traditionally bind men together. Young Americans in particular are often quite moved by it. It continues to express for them their feeling of the pointlessness of the sacrifices that society demands of its members. But they are often quite confused about the novel too. In particular they do not quite know what to do with Meursault's queerness and the fact that his alienation leads to murder. They prefer to concentrate on the innocence and sincerity of the hero in a world he never made: they see his conflict with society as a simple one of good against evil.

Professional critics are not satisfied to remain at this level. They have usually taken a more complex view of Meursault as a hero. They see in him some of the dangerous potentials of the contemporary mass man who submits to the dominant political forces without question and without commitment. But the critics also do not quite know how to add up the whole novel. They tend to concentrate on aspects that fit their preconceptions and to ignore others. Their goal has been to justify, if not Meursault, at least Camus himself, and to make of him the mature moralist that he certainly was not—if he ever was—when he wrote *The Stranger*.

It has been forgotten, I think, that Camus wrote the novel when he was in his mid-twenties; it has not been recognized that it is the book

[1] Quoted by Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Camus, Algeria, and *The Fall*," *The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 9, 1969, p. 8.

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of a very, very young man capable of communicating complex feelings but not complex moral ideas. The first statement of its theme in his *Notebooks* (April, 1937, when Camus was twenty-four), written before he was even consciously considering *The Stranger,* was one from which he never basically departed. It is the theme of opposition between the sincere individual and an uncomprehending society: "Story—the man who refuses to justify himself. Other people prefer their idea of him. He dies, alone in his awareness of what he really is—Vanity of this consolation."[2] The sentimental pessimism of this entry is the heart of the impression that Camus wanted to leave the reader with in *The Stranger.* Only in the novel there is no suggestion of the "vanity" of Meursault's supposed self-awareness: it is its heroic character that is implicitly celebrated. The moral atmosphere in which the novel was written is perhaps most precisely expressed by a later entry, a quotation from Antisthenes: " 'It is a regal thing to do good and hear evil spoken of oneself' " (1942). This is echoed in in the last line of the novel: "For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration."[3] The first decade or so of criticism of *The Stranger* was apparently not sufficiently responsive to what Camus intended to be its central moral fact. There was too much denigration of the hero, too little appreciation of Meursault as the embodiment of some of the author's ideals. Camus attempted to put criticism on the right track in 1955 when he was asked to write a brief *Avant-propos* to the school edition of *L'Étranger.* He reaffirmed and further articulated the original inspiration he had given voice to in his *Notebooks.* Since then, readers have had to come to terms with the author's clearly stated point of view. It has not been easy.

> Meusault for me [Camus writes] is not a piece of human wreckage, but a man who is poor, naked and in love with the sun which leaves no shadows. Far from being lacking in all feeling, he is inspired by a passion which is profound because unspoken, the passion for the absolute and for truth. It is still a negative truth, that of being alive and experiencing life, but without it no conquest of oneself or of the world will ever be possible.
>
> One would not therefore be much mistaken in reading *L'Étranger* as the story of a man who, without any heroics, accepts to die for the truth. It also occurs to me to say, and always paradoxically, that I tried to represent in my character the only Christ that we deserve. . . .[4]

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[2] *Notebooks: 1935-1942,* trans. with introd. Philip Thody (New York, 1963), p. 32.

[3] *The Stranger, trans.* Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1954), p. 154. This edition (originally published in 1946) is based on the original Gallimard edition of *L'Étranger,* published in 1942.

[4] *L'Étranger,* ed. with introd. G. Brée and C. Lynes (New York, 1955), vii. This edi-

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Let us grant that Camus' "affection" for Meursault is (as he goes on to say) "a little ironic": he implicitly recognizes that his hero's moral horizon is limited, that his passive acceptance of the world has some dangers. The accent, nevertheless, is strongly on the positive. There is no suggestion in the preface that Meursault is morally sick, that he is deeply responsible and blameable for the murder of the Arab. It is his "innocence" and sincerity that leads him astray, not murderous wishes.

Those critics, like Thomas Hanna and, to some extent, Philip Thody, who have accepted Camus' point of view, raise Meursault's "indifference" to a metaphysical level–it becomes a "holy" indifference—and see him as no more than a victim of circumstance and an immoral society. They believe that there is no "explanation" for the murder and that any attempt to explain it is as existentially absurd as any attempt to explain irrational existence itself. It is as absurd as society's attempt to impose its conventional moral standards on an independent soul. They acquiesce in the absurd impression that Camus tried to create. Germaine Brée takes what I think is a more sensible view, emphasizing Meursault's limitations, but she loses something of the "exemplary pagan hero" that Camus saw in Meursault. The introduction to the school edition almosts contradicts Camus' *Avant-propos:*

> Meursault's attitude toward life is not Camus's, nor did Camus offer his character as a model for emulation. Meursault is not a "hero." He is rather a man suffering from a malady of the spirit, from a new form of the nineteenth-century Romantic "mal du siècle." His murder of the Arab, by its very lack of conscious motivation, reveals his attitude has dangerously inhuman or sub-human implications. Yet society's answer to this act seems to Camus totally invalid.[5]

But Camus' own remarks indicate that at most he sees Meursault as a somewhat incomplete, not as a "dangerously inhuman or subhuman" person. It may be, as Miss Brée declares in her book on Camus,[6] that Camus intended *The Stranger* as a "cautionary tale," dramatizing the dangers of excessive passivity "in the face of the absurd," but he does not interpret the dangers in the moral sense that Miss Brée does. In attempting to support her view, she goes so far as to claim that at the end of the novel Meursault finally understands the moral implications of his crime, that he becomes aware that he has violated "a natural, not a human law." But in fact all that Meursault comes to realize is that he is "guilty of a criminal

tion is based on the final Gallimard edition, published in 1953, with revisions by the author. The translation of the *Avant-propos* is that of Thody (see below, note 9), p. 30.

[5] See the introduction to *L'Étranger*, pp. 11-12.

[6] See Germaine Brée, *Camus* (New Brunswick, 1959), pp. 111-114.

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offense" (p. 148). He does not recognize that he has violated anything deeper than a superficial social rule.

No, *The Stranger* is not a mature work of art. Its moral complexity lies in the minds of the critics,[7] not in the novel. Its basic reality is the confrontation of a well-intentioned (if limited) individual with an insensitive and even hostile world. Younger readers seem to be responding more accurately than the critics to Camus' simple intentions. His irony is one-dimensional: he suggests, with little qualification, that society is evil, composed of a network of illusions, and that Meursault is good, vitally in touch with reality. There is apparently no conscious intent on his part to suggest that society's view of Meursault has substantial reality in it or that Meursault's view of himself is basically illusory. Yet there is something else in *The Stranger,* a force not comprehended by—and even contradicting—its simple romantic pessimism, something in addition to its moral stance that perhaps explains the power it has over readers. It contains, I think, a great deal of semi-conscious and unconscious material, much of which has not been properly integrated into its artistic framework. It is really a nightmarish novel, but nightmarish in its feeling, not in its conception. Camus was apparently not aware of the degree of his own involvement in *The Stranger,* for he insisted that it was primarily an "exercise in objectivity,"[8] not in self-revelation. Thody writes that Camus "always denied that he had depicted himself in any of the characters of his novels."[9] His *Notebooks* make clear how far from the center of his mind he had to push the thought that his hero was a representation of himself and of his own unconscious conflicts:

> Mistake of a psychology which concentrates on details. Men who are seeking and analyzing themselves. To know oneself, one should assert oneself. . . We continue to shape our personalities all our life. If we knew ourselves perfectly, we should die.
> (May, 1937)

> What really upsets me is the importance given to reactions of the soul. If you are melancholy, then life with another person becomes impossible. For if you have any nobility of spirit you cannot bear the innumerable questions asked of you. For

[7] One critic who has taken explicit issue with Camus' own interpretation of his novel is Ignace Feuerlicht. In "Camus' *L'Étranger* Reconsidered," *PMLA,* LXXVIII (December 1963), 606-621, Mr. Feuerlicht shows what attention to details and immunity from existential romantic moralizing can do to reveal the simple reality of a disturbing and often confusing text. Meursault, he writes, doesn't "accept to die for truth"; he dies only *because* of his sincerity, not *for* its sake. "He does not live or die for anybody or anything, nor does he think he does, and his death does not change anything or anybody." Mr. Feuerlicht, however, does not attempt to make sense of the confusions of the novel, nor does he offer any hypothesis to explain the discrepancy between the author's intentions and the actualities of the text.

[8] See the introduction to *Notebooks,* x-xi.

[9] Philip Thody, *Albert Camus: 1913-1960* (New York, 1961), p. 36.

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such feelings can have about as much importance as getting up an appetite or wanting to. . . . (August, 1937)

Green and his *Journal.* Notes down a number of dreams. I always find this kind of thing boring. (November, 1939)

The "silence" of his hero is, I think, an unconscious reflection of Camus' need to be silent about the truth within himself. It may imply some dim awareness on his own part of his need to repress. "The innocent," he proudly wrote in his *Notebooks* (October, 1937), "is the person who explains nothing." "Not talking" may be a legitimate form of literary communication, but only if the author has some degree of control over what is not said and prevents it from contradicting the surface impression that the work leaves in the mind of the reader. What is not said then suggests that further reality which extends the limits of the work and gives it its resonance and compelling power. The basic difficulty with *The Stranger* is that the unspoken statement contradicts the spoken, the voice of the unconscious speaks in direct opposition to the voice of conscious art itself. Whatever essential mystery the novel appears to possess on first reading is dissipated by analysis in depth—and it is almost too easy to psychoanalyze *The Stranger*—its mystery is seen to be based on a fear, rather than a vital reception, of reality; we feel let down by a writer who refuses, who is afraid, to tell all.[10]

To preserve his own sense of innocence, Camus had to see Meursault as primarily innocent, as a victim of the hostility of society. The possibility of multiple causation, the possibility that his hero is not merely "acted upon" by external forces, but unconsciously "arranges" his fate because he is driven by internal irrational forces, calls into question the simplistic absurdist philosophy on which the novel is based. The intent was to create a sort of stoical hero of the pleasure principle; the reality looks more like a Kafkaesque victim of the forces of superego and id. The intent was to make a murder appear to have "just happened"; the reality is a nightmare of the soul. Yet if the novel had appeared to break with reality at any point, as Kafka's stories often do, Camus would not have been able to feel that the murder "just happened." He would have been forced to see that the external act was the reflection of internal wishes. If the atmosphere of the dream had pervaded the novel, as it does in Kafka, the objective events would have been recognizable as internal

[10] Frederick C. Crews makes essentially the same point in discussing the uneven quality of Hawthorne's fiction: "We must make an aesthetic distinction between works whose deepest meaning *negates* their surface pieties and those more satisfying ones in which a total unity of effect is achieved." *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (New York, 1966), p. 72.

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experiences, the visible seen as the expression of the invisible. The mechanism of defense would have collapsed and the murderous wishes exposed to full view.

If, then, the novel betrays a greater complexity than Camus himself intended, if it is far more (and far less) than that "exercise in objectivity" on which he prided himself, it was apparently the result of his strong unconscious identification with Meursault. While this leads him to the shocking extreme of overlooking, and even implicitly justifying, Meursault's moral defects, it at the same time cannot help but communicate something more of his hero's true character than he would care to admit. And somewhere within himself, perhaps, Camus knew how much of that reality he was exposing in his art. As *The Stranger* began to grow visible in his mind, he wrote in his *Notebooks* (August, 1937) that he sometimes needed "to write things which I cannot completely control but which therefore prove that what is in me is stronger than I am."

II

How to prove that the "indifferent" Meursault really collaborates in his own downfall? We need not go far to show that beneath his calm surface Meursault is not altogether indifferent, that he is even a man of intense, if severely concentrated passions. Camus himself, we have seen, speaks of his "passion for the absolute and for truth." (In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus declares that the courageous man lives joyfully in the "absurd" confrontation between his quest for the absolute—a "nostalgia for unity"—and the hard truth of a universe in which that quest must fail.)[11] Certainly Meursault's hidden "passion for truth" becomes completely visible in the exultant peroration with which the novel ends: "I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe" (p. 154). But where in the text are the verbal or behavioral correlatives to his "passion for the absolute"? Sartre, in his explication of *The Stranger,* remarks that Meursault is a not altogether satisfactory absurdist hero because he apparently does not possess "that hidden gnawing . . . which is due to the blinding presence of death."[12] And this is not an unusual reading of the novel. But if we link the philosophical or conceptual meaning of the absolute to its psychological or experiential meaning, I think we can find a basis for Camus' claim. I don't know if Camus clearly intended it, but Meursault's unverbalized, semi-conscious feeling for his mother

[11] *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York, 1955), pp. 13 and 21.

[12] Jean-Paul Sartre, "An Explication of *The Stranger,*" in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. G. Brée (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.) p. 114.

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—a feeling that *is* clearly pointed up in the novel—works *novelistically* as the equivalent of that philosophical "passion for the absolute." The longing for maternal unity, the infra-rational desire to be reunited with the departed Mother, is, for Meursault, the sensory equivalent of the supra-rational dream of philosophical unity. It is *his* quest for a satisfaction that cannot be attained in this world.

But Meursault's hidden yearning is not revealed in so many words. It is adumbrated through the technique of parallel structures. How he really feels about his mother can be deduced by examining Meursault's underground link with the love and love-hate relationships of others in the novel. Old Salamano and his dog, Raymond and his Arab mistress, an Arab prisoner and his mother, all have unexpressed meaning for the hero; they tell us more about him than he can tell us himself. Salamano, for example, who (like Raymond, the pimp) lives on the same floor of the dank apartment house as Meursault, has mistreated his ugly, mangy dog for years until, finally, the terrorized animal runs away and leaves Salamano without a companion. Meursault listens to the "little wheezing sound" of the old man weeping next door: "For some reason, I don't know what, I began thinking of Mother. But I had to get up early next day; so, as I wasn't feeling hungry, I did without supper, and went straight to bed" (p. 50). The fact that at this moment he "wasn't feeling hungry" is not in itself important, but if we remember that at the all night vigil for his dead mother at the Home for Aged Persons the supposedly indifferent Meursault also "wasn't hungry" and skipped his dinner (p. 9), both instances of not eating may reinforce one another —both may express a half-buried emotional attachment. (It is easy to forget Meursault's lack of appetite at the vigil because later so much is made of the fact that he drank *café au lait* and smoked cigarettes.)

Another less direct suggestion of unexpressed feeling may be found in an earlier passage, before the dog is lost, when Meursault stands on his landing—he describes the building as "quiet as the grave," reminding us of the mother's death—hearing "nothing but the blood throbbing in [his] ears . . . Then the dog began to moan in old Salamano's room, and through the sleep-bound house the little plaintive sound rose slowly, like a flower growing out of the silence and the darkness" (p. 42). Interestingly, Camus eliminated the last clause (a separate sentence in the French), beginning with "through the sleepbound house . . . ," in the final edition of *L'Étranger*. Perhaps he thought that the image was too extreme and too early—too early in the novel before the climax of the murder—a violation of Meursault's

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simple, relatively non-metaphysical style. But it may also have been because it suggests too forcefully a depth of emotion that Meursault might feel but could not be conscious of. Yet the image is in keeping with the silence between mother and son, and the intense, inaudible love that grew in that silence.

A final suggestion occurs later, when Meursault is in prison and Marie comes to visit him for the first and last time. She faces him across a gap of about thirty feet, and both of them are behind high iron grilles, through which the prisoners and visitors talk to each other. Here the parallel structure is provided by an Arab prisoner, squatting next to Meursault, whose visitor is a "small old woman with tight-set lips" (p. 90), squatting next to Marie. ". . . The prisoner on my left, a youngster with thin, girlish hands, never said a word. His eyes, I noticed, were fixed on the little old woman opposite him, and she returned his gaze with a sort of hungry passion" (p. 92). In the midst of all the noise of prisoners and visitors talking to one another, the "only oasis of silence was made by the young fellow and the old woman gazing into each other's eyes" (p. 94).

Once we have struck through the mask of indifference, Camus' parallel structures help us to find other unexpressed, but more deeply unconscious feelings in Meursault besides intense love for his mother. At this point, however, we are moving into difficult terrain, for we are, I think, going well beyond the author's intent, and even contradicting his purposes in *The Stranger*. For if, as I shall maintain, the novel at its profoundest implies that Meursault is ambivalent and guilt-ridden where his mother is concerned, the work itself denies Camus' own conception of his hero as the "innocent" victim of society's aggression. As we have already noted, although Camus saw him as limited, perhaps as excessively passive, he did not see him as evil, murderous or sub-human. He did not see him as secretly committed to the events in which he is caught up. But the novel itself, when read psychoanalytically, tells otherwise. Hence the special need for a psychoanalytical approach to this puzzling work.

Is it not likely that if Meursault must hide his strong feelings for his mother he is hiding other feelings as well? His inability to recognize the intensity of his love is itself the clue to more profound repressions. Let me offer the hypothesis that his indifference is his defense against maternal rejection, a defense against his mother's apparent indifference to him. (" '. . . For years she'd never had a word to say to me, and I could see she was moping, with no one to talk to' " [p. 58]). The hatred and the guilt locked inside that indifference eventually lead Meursault to send his mother away, whereupon the guilt increases; and at her death everything comes to a boil.

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Chapters III and IV are crucial for verifying this hypothesis, or at least for making it plausible. The events that lead to the murder begin here with Meursault's decision to involve himself in Raymond's plans for revenge on his Arab mistress (whom Raymond suspects of infidelity). The word "decision" may seem inappropriate to describe Meursault's mental processes: the strange reason he gives for writing a letter to help Raymond prepare the girl for her "punishment" is that he "wanted to satisfy Raymond, as I'd no reason not to satisfy him" (p. 41). But unconsciously the decision is a real one, I think, for it expresses Meursault's ambivalent attitude towards his mother. As Raymond felt "let down" by his mistress, Meursault felt let down by his mother's failure to respond the way he wished. He sees in Raymond's sadistic treatment of the girl the appropriate response of the rejected suitor: "I told him one could never be quite sure how to act in such cases, but I quite understood his wanting her to suffer for it" (p. 40). Of course this can be read in a perfectly innocent way, but it makes sense to keep the unconscious dimension in mind and to recognize that more than merely objective understanding may be implied here.

"May" verges on "must" the following Sunday. Three things are happening at about the same time on Meursault's landing: Salamano is mistreating his dog as they go out for a walk (" 'Filthy brute! Get on, you cur!' " [p.44]); Meursault and his girl friend Marie, having slept together the previous night, are getting their lunch ready ("When she laughed I wanted her again. A moment later she asked me if I loved her. I said that sort of question had no meaning, really; but I supposed I didn't" [p. 44].); Raymond is beating and yelling at his mistress (" 'You let me down, you bitch! I'll learn you to let me down!' " [p. 44]). Meursault's unconscious life is being expressed by both Salamano and Raymond, and we understand why he is unable to commit himself to Marie. Although Marie is amused by Salamano she is horrified by Raymond's behavior and asks Meursault to get a policeman. He refuses, becauses he "didn't like policemen" (p. 45), but one turns up eventually to take the situation in hand, and Meursault and Marie return to eat their lunch. Marie, however, has lost her appetite, so that Meursault eats "nearly all" (p. 46) they have prepared.

If not eating signifies unconscious attachment to Mother, eating "nearly all," in this case, suggests unconscious hostility, for Meursault is now thoroughly involved in Raymond's ambivalence. He does not want a policeman to judge the latent pleasure he derives from hearing the Arab girl get what she deserves. ("I agreed it wasn't a bad plan," he said earlier; "it would punish her, all right" [p. 40]). The pleasure,

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of course, is mixed with guilt and Meursault does not for the moment want to be judged: he wants only to gratify an uncompromising demand from the id. Yet only for the moment. For that Sunday is the day the mistreated dog runs away from the ambivalent Salamano. It's as if the dog's action is for Meursault the appropriate punishment for the unconscious pleasure he has taken in Raymond's sadistic treatment of his mistress. (As well as the pleasure he may have taken in Salamano's brutality towards the dog: when Raymond asks Meursault if he wasn't disgusted by the way the old man served his dog, he answers: " 'No' " [p. 34]). It is now clear that his conscious thoughts of his mother ("For some reason, I don't know what, I began thinking of Mother . . ." [p. 50]) when he hears Salamano weeping in the next room and his lack of interest in food reveal not only unconscious love, but unconscious hatred and guilt. Ultimately Meursault cannot live without the policeman.[13]

Once it is recognized by the reader that Meursault is a man driven by unconscious forces over which he has little control, the whole novel begins to be a different sort of experience than was intended by the author. It begins to suggest dual, and even multiple perspectives of meaning: not richly, however, but confusingly, for these do not supplement but tend to destroy one another. Unlike Raskolnikov, whose character grows in our mind with the recognition of multiple causation, the strength of Meursault's character is dissipated if there is any possibility of complex and even contradictory motivation. Meursault kills the Arab, he thinks, "because of the sun" (p. 130) just as Raskolnikov kills the old woman to get her money; but Camus tries to give the impression that the sun is a cause for which Meur-

[13] The reverse identifications are also useful in interpreting Meursault's throbbing unconscious. If Meursault sees the dog and the Arab girl, not as the Mother but as *himself*, and Salamano and Raymond, not as himself but as the Mother, the symbolism suggests either (1) the unjust character of the Mother's treatment of the son or (2) the son's proper punishment for his rejection of the Mother The latter (2) is illustrated when Meursault eats his huge lunch, not, in this perspective, from gratification at having symbolically beaten the Mother, but—like Mrs. Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment*, who eats a hearty lunch after being soundly thrashed by her husband—from the comforting sense of having, himself, been justly beaten. The former (1) is illustrated by Camus himself in his *Notebooks:* "The man who has lived for a long time and who adopts a child. He pours out onto him his whole lonely past. And in the tight little universe in which he lives, constantly with the child, he feels himself master, and ruler over a magnificent kingdom. He bullies and frightens the child, drives him mad with his whims and violent demands. Until, one day, the child runs away and the man finds himself alone again, with his tears and a terrible upsurge of love for the toy he has just lost" (1939). (The word "bully" is also used earlier to describe the effect of the Algerian sun—that sun which is said to be the "cause" of the murder: "And the sun was beating down like a great bully" [1938]. See below, note 15.)

If it does not appear immediately convincing that Meursault would identify Raymond with Mother, there is support for this outside the text. Raymond's surname, Sintès, was Camus' mother's maiden name. His grandmother (Sintès) was the chief disciplinarian in Camus' childhood, and brought "up the children with a whip." The mother was rather passive, being hampered by deafness and a speech impediment. (See Thody, pp. 1-2.)

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sault is in no way responsible, and that any other deeper causes that the reader may guess at do not concern him, are merely part of society's absurd quest for absolutes. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, *encourages* us to look further and to find a natural continuity between killing for money and the contradictory psychological fact of unconcern about money, between killing for money and killing to prove oneself a moral superman, between killing for money and symbolically killing one's own mother. For Camus there is only *discontinuity* between the sun and any other cause that might imply responsible involvement in society on the part of Meursault: continuity would spoil the picture of an innocent victim. If we dig too deeply into *The Stranger* we destroy the effect that Camus intended to create. Since, nevertheless, we do dig deeply, and cannot help ourselves because Camus himself (unconsciously) encourages us to do so, the effect is spoiled, confusion results, and vital mystery disappears.

The whole novel is filled with clues to Meursault's hidden quest for punishment. The logic of his fate is expressed in his silence. *Sometimes the silence is total:* When the examining magistrate three times asks why he fired four extra shots into the body of the prostrate Arab, Meursault says nothing. At the trial, Meursault at first feels that he has "something really important to tell" the court, which appears to him to be trying to exclude him from the proceedings, but, "on second thoughts," finds that he has "nothing to say" (p. 124). *Sometimes the silence is not of words but of affect and self-understanding:* Marie seems to shrink away from Meursault's caresses when he tells her that his mother died "Yesterday."[14] "I was just going to explain to her that it wasn't my fault, but I checked myself, as I remembered having said the same thing to my employer, and realizing [sic] then it sounded rather foolish. Still, foolish or not, somehow one can't help feeling a bit guilty, I suppose" (p. 24). Since the bias of the novel urges us to smile at Marie's conventional distaste for someone who fails to pay respects to the dead, and to condemn society's implicit failure to look straight at the truth of mortality, we may be misled by Meursault's casual acceptance of minor guilt and overlook the hint of major unconscious guilt. Again, when Meursault tells the lawyer assigned to defend him that he was "quite fond" of his mother, but then adds, "as an afterthought," that "all normal people . . . had more or less desired the death of those they

[14] Actually, "yesterday" (Friday), as Mr. Feuerlicht points out, was the day of the burial. His mother died on Wednesday or Thursday. Perhaps this is further evidence of Meursault's feeling of guilt: by making things look worse than they are, he invites Marie's condemnation, i.e., proper punishment for his sins.

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loved, at some time or another . . ." (p. 80), the lawyer's worldly-wise response to such simple honesty—he warns Meursault not to make such a statement in court—encourages us to overlook the special relevance of the remark to Meursault's inner life. *Sometimes the silence is neither of words nor affect but of self-understanding:* As Meursault advances alone towards the Arab in the overwhelming heat of the open beach—he feels he must "retrieve the pool of shadow by the rock" and hear the tinkle of the "cold, clear stream behind it" (p. 73)—he is driven to take one, final, fatal step forward, knowing perfectly well that "it was a fool thing to do" (p. 75). But Meursault cannot understand what human force the sun, "pressing on [his] back" (p. 75), signifies.[15] He is not aware of the force of unconscious guilt which demands that society condemn him and execute him.

We smile when the prosecutor proclaims: ' "I accuse the prisoner of behaving at his mother's funeral in a way that showed he was already a criminal at heart" ' (p. 122). Even more absurd is the prosecutor's charge that the prisoner is "morally guilty of his mother's death" (p. 128). But both statements express for Meursault his own inexpressible need to collaborate in the punishment which society "absurdly" imposes on him. "It came to this; the man under sentence was obliged to collaborate mentally, it was in his interest that all should go off without a hitch" (pp. 139-140). Meursault is speaking here of how useless it is to wish that the machine would break down —"If by some fluke the knife didn't do its job, they started again" (p. 139)—but he unknowingly testifies to its moral power. In the grand manner of the French tradition, he refuses to accept the moral authority of the guillotine; but what would he do without that knife? It, and not absurdist philosophy, solves Meursault's problem for him.

Thus the novel's unsatisfactory ending, which has been interpreted in many different ways by the critics, cannot be morally justified, but it can, I think, be understood. Meursault, as we have noted, tells the priest that he is not "conscious of any 'sin' " that he has committed, merely that he has performed an anti-social act. But this is precisely why he must irrationally punish himself: he cannot bring his guilt into the light and face himself for what he is. The liberation he experiences after his "great rush of anger" at the priest "had washed

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[15] The sun, that great "bully" (see above, note 13), is one of a number of Father symbols in the novel, and appears to represent, despite Camus' conscious intentions, the avenging force of legitimate social authority. Meursault is in revolt against the principle of authority but, like Georg in Kafka's "The Judgment," unconscious guilt at his presumption compels him to submit to its terrible sentence of death. In discussing sunlight as Jaffrey Pyncheon's chief symbolic attribute, Mr. Crews (see above, *The Sins of the Fathers*, p. 265) cites the example of a patient of Karl Abraham's whose "obsessive fear of bright sunlight" was linked with his feeling about his father. The patient " 'complained about his failure in life, and said that his father literally weighed him down.' "

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me clean" (p. 154) is not—as Camus surely thought it was—so much a sign of achieved philosophical maturity, a lofty awareness of death and its implications, as it is a masochistic satisfaction with his fate. His happy doom now, after having rejected his mother, is to be rejected by his fellow men; yet he must interpret his social condemnation as evidence of his own moral superiority.

Unconsciously, then, Meursault "leaps" to his death, in effect committing not only ordinary suicide but also what Camus calls philosophical suicide, because he needs the moral order of society to which he is consciously indifferent. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus asks: "Is one going to die, escape by the leap, rebuild a mansion of ideas and forms to one's own scale? Is one, on the contrary, going to take up the heart-rending and marvelous wager of the absurd?" (p. 39). Meursault, at bottom, is not really taking up the "wager of the absurd." He is being true to the meaning of his own name. (*meur:* the root of the present indicative of *mourir* 'to die'; suggests also *la mer*[16] 'the sea'; *sault:* related to *sauter* 'to leap,' 'to jump,' and to the English word *sault* 'a leap.') He is leaping to his death, leaping into the maternal sea, rather than continuing to struggle in the gray twilight of the life of the absurd.

III

One could go on looking for evidence in *The Stranger* of what Carl A. Viggiani calls the Oedipal drama central to all Camus' works.[17] One could also investigate the link between Camus' personal life and his art. But neither would be of much service in further illuminating the artistic failures and successes of this novel. The important thing is not that Camus was in the toils of an Oedipus complex—we all are, more or less—but that his unconscious conflicts interfered, fatally, with the moral power, the philosophical poise, of *The Stranger*.[18] Camus'

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[16] The name and the fate of Patrice Mersault, the hero of Camus' first (unpublished) novel, who "in the full blaze of sun and sea . . . goes to his ecstatic death," makes this association more likely. (See Brée, *Camus*, pp. 63ff.)

[17] "Embedded in the character and plot structure of his works is the fatal attraction of the mother, the condemnation by the father, and the rebellion of the son." "Camus' *L'Étranger*," *PMLA*, LXXI (December 1956), 876. (Cf. the *Notebooks:* "The strange feeling which the son has for his mother constitutes his whole sensibility" (May, 1935). Yet despite Mr. Viggiani's recognition of the Oedipal drama hidden in *The Stranger*—with great insight he calls the novel "a personal confession made in a thinly disguised journal by a fictional surrogate of the author"—he finally interprets the novel in mythical and metaphysical rather than in psychological terms. He declares that we are not asking the right question when we ask why Meursault killed the Arab. ("If one asks, 'Why did Meursault kill the Arab?' only one answer is possible: because of the sun, the answer given by Meursault.") The right question is: "What does the murder mean?" And Mr. Viggiani thinks it means the "catastrophe that illuminates the human condition." He thus "raises" psychology to a metaphysical plane and thereby loses the simple fact of Meursault's need for punishment.

[18] Paul de Man, in his review of the second volume of Camus' *Notebooks* (1942-1951)—see *The New York Review of Books*, December 23, 1965, pp. 10-13—offers some trenchant observations on Camus' weaknesses and, without any assistance from psychoanalysis, comes to conclusions with respect to all of Camus' works that are similar to those of the present

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great concern to keep what he called, during the time he was writing the novel, his "secret" *Notebooks,* 1937), the secret of his lonely, silent suffering in the face of an absurd world, actually served to avoid a confrontation with the deeper secret of his own unconscious life. His stoical apatheia, his devotion to heroic control, to that "heroism born of weakness" which Mann describes in "Death in Venice" as the distinguishing characteristic of Aschenbach's art and life, that renunciation of "knowledge" of the "abyss" which foreshadows Aschenbach's decline, also betrayed Camus into what, in effect, becomes an unironic justification of Meursault's crime.

Like Meursault, who is never conscious of having committed any "sin," Camus himself declared that sin is one of the "words that I have never quite understood."[19] He was not, as he perhaps thought, merely rejecting the theological concept of original sin, but denying his complicity in the unconscious wishes made visible in *The Stranger.* His inability to come to terms with his buried life thus took its heavy moral toll: he even had to see his defective hero as a modern Christ—an up-to-date version, perhaps, of the silent Christ of "The Grand Inquisitor." It is not unreasonable to suppose that Camus could *never* come to terms with his buried life, for the notion of Meursault as Christ was publically affirmed in 1955, only five years before his death. Despite his increased sense of moral commitment and of the great dangers of nihilism and the will to power, Camus never clearly admitted in later years that he was the victim of these dangerous tendencies in his first published novel. He had unconsciously decided to preserve an inward silence about his motives and he could not condemn, he could scarcely recognize the specific moral failure of his youthful work, gripped as he was by the forbidden fantasy. "If we knew ourselves perfectly, we should die," he wrote in the *Notebooks* (May, 1937) when he was twenty-four. The older Camus would scarcely have disagreed.

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essay. Mr. de Man writes that Camus' work "contains some beautiful flights of lyrical elation along with some astute observations on the incongruity of the human condition" but that it "is lacking in ethical profundity despite its recurrent claims to high moral seriousness"; that Camus was caught by a "seductive but irresponsible dream" of innocent beauty and was unable to face up to the complexities of historical truth.

[19] Quoted by Thomas Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago, 1958), p. 8.

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