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CAMUS'S *L'ÉTRANGER* RECONSIDERED

BY IGNACE FEUERLICHT

TWENTY YEARS after its publication in 1942, Camus's short novel *L'Étranger* has preserved its wide appeal through its haunting intensity, strange simplicity, and virile freshness. However, the general overemphasis on the philosophical significance of the story, the failure to deal with certain literary aspects, and the obscure or ambiguous features of the novel seem to call for a new appraisal of Camus's masterpiece.

The ambiguity of the novel starts with the title. With regard to whom or to what is Meursault a stranger or an alien? The word *étranger* is only used twice in the *récit*, but not for Meursault (106/20, 109/17).¹ Alienation or estrangement is said to be the mood of Camus's *L'Étranger*,² and this short novel allegedly demonstrates a person's complete lack of relatedness to other human beings.³ Meursault, however, is not like Baudelaire's "Étranger," who has no friends, like the "stranger" in Schnitzler's short story "Die Fremde," or like the outsiders in Thomas Mann's early writings, who create an atmosphere of cold estrangement whenever they meet other people. Meursault is not odd, certainly not odder than, for instance, Salamano. True, Marie once calls him "bizarre," but this does not apply to his way of life, or his character, only to his unconventional views of love and marriage. He is not a stranger to Masson or to his boss. He has friends, such as Céleste, Emmanuel, Raymond; and his friends stay by him when he is in trouble. People in the neighborhood know him and he knows them. He is one of them. He does not want to be different from other people and does not think he is (86/9). He does not repel or reject anybody. It is not true that his "attitudes and responses . . . are so different from those of ordinary people that they brand him as an outsider."⁴ Strangers want to strike up a conversation with him, such as the soldier on the bus or the concierge in the old age home. He appeals to Masson almost from the start. Even the prison warden takes a liking to him.

His relationship to the investigating magistrate becomes "cordial" in a way (90/18), the elderly newspaperman greets him cordially (104/1), and the presiding judge addresses him in a "cordial fashion" (106/5). He finds the magistrate and the newspaperman "likable" (84/12, 103/8) and has a "natural desire" to be liked by other people, by his boss and his lawyer,

for instance. He appreciates it that the boss and Raymond are "nice" and the gendarmes kind to him (44/1, 58/8, 124/15). When he thinks he is being detested by the public in court, he feels like crying.

Thus, it is rather obvious that Meursault is not a stranger to others. However, it is more difficult to determine whether he is a stranger to himself, as it has often been said.⁵ In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (p. 34), Camus holds that man is an eternal stranger to himself, that he cannot grasp and define his self or integrate its different aspects. While Meursault never has an introspective adventure or philosophic train of thought that would lead him to a similar conclusion, he seems to have several experiences where he feels at least parts of his personality as temporarily belonging to the outside world. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (p. 29), Camus speaks of "l'étranger qui, à certaines secondes, vient à notre rencontre dans une glace," giving us the feeling of absurdity. At one time the reflection of his face in the tin bowl stays sad and severe while Meursault is smiling at it, and it also takes him months to recognize the voice in the prison cell as his own. But these moments, if they constitute true self-estrangement at all, are too few and too short to characterize Meursault as a stranger to himself. He is unlike Oreste in Sartre's *Les Mouches*, who at the end experiences his own voice and words as outside the limits of his self and who is repeatedly called a stranger to himself.⁶ He is also unlike Pablo in Sartre's "Le Mur," who experiences

¹ These page and line numbers refer to the edition of *L'Étranger* by G. Brée and C. Lynes, Jr. (New York, 1955), which has been used because of its convenient numbering of lines. Symbols used for Camus's works are: *EE*=*L'Été* (Paris, 1954); *EN*=*L'Envers et l'endroit* (Paris, 1958); *HR*=*L'Homme révolté* (Paris, 1951); *MS*=*Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris, 1959); *N*=*Noces* (Paris, 1945).

² A. W. Levi, *Philosophy and the Modern World* (Bloomington, Ind., 1959), p. 203.

³ Ernst Kahler, *The Tower and the Abyss* (New York, 1957), p. 203; cf. Leon S. Roudiez, "L'Étranger, La Chute, and the Aesthetic Legacy of Gide," *FR*, xxxii (1959), 305.

⁴ St. Ullmann, *The Image in the Modern French Novel* (Cambridge, Eng., 1960), p. 245.

⁵ Gaëtan Picon, *Panorama de la nouvelle littérature française* (Paris, 1949), p. 115; Herb. S. Gershman, "On L'Étranger," *FR*, xxix (1956), 303; Alb. Maquet, *Albert Camus ou l'Invincible Été* (Paris, 1955), p. 40; Rachel Bepaloff, "The World of the Man Condemned to Death," *Camus*, ed. G. Brée (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962), p. 93.

⁶ J.-P. Sartre, *Théâtre* (Paris, 1947), pp. 61, 101.

body-alienation ("Mon corps . . . ça n'était plus vrai").

Since Meursault has given up introspection, he also lacks Thoreau's experience of self-estrangement: "I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you."⁷ Nor is Meursault like one of the neurotics described by Freud, who suddenly has thoughts of an unknown origin or impulses that are like those of a stranger, and whose "I" feels subjected to a fearful foreign invasion.⁸ Nor does he ever approach a state of mind where he would say like Kafka that he has hardly anything in common with himself.⁹ On the other hand, he has an experience which is the opposite of self-estrangement. When the unknown young reporter looks at him in court, Meursault has the "bizarre" impression of being watched by himself (105/1).

Sartre's Oreste calls himself not only a stranger to himself, but also a stranger to nature. Meursault has also been taken to be "the symbol of man perpetually estranged in the world,"¹⁰ a "figure representing man's metaphysical status as an outsider, a being who does not feel he belongs . . . to the world in which he has been placed."¹¹ Camus mentions, in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (p. 28), as one of the sources of the "absurd" the discovery that the world is "thick," alien, that nature "denies" us, that there is at the bottom of any of nature's beauties something inhuman, and that the world shows us its basic hostility. In *L'Homme révolté* (p. 36) Camus thinks that human reality in its "totality" suffers from world alienation, from the distance that separates man from himself and from the world.

Meursault never quite reaches this point of recognition and suffering. To be sure, he occasionally finds a landscape "inhuman and depressing," but only because of the excessive sunshine (33/23), as Camus finds Djémila "inhuman" under the "pouring sun" (*N*, p. 46). One or two hours before this observation on the countryside, he would have enjoyed taking a walk in the very same landscape (30/16). Furthermore, an inhuman countryside presupposes a human one. Meursault comes closest to alienation from the world in the last chapter of the first part, when on his solitary walk on the beach he experiences the hostility of the two o'clock sun. The heat opposes his advancing. He grits his teeth, clenches his fists, and strains every nerve in order to "triumph" over the sun that sends

swords of light from the sand, from shells, or from broken glass. This is before he again sees or even suspects the Arab's knife. The sun sends him something like a long, sparkling blade, which he later calls *glaive éclatant* and *épée brûlante*. The sea sends him a heavy and hot breath, the sky opens to pour down fire, and it is against this hostile world that his whole body strains, that his hand contracts on the revolver and a shot goes off.

Only in this episode and in the funeral procession is nature shown as opposing and degrading man. Otherwise, Meursault loves the sea and the sun. He finds release in the sea (96/15), and the sun does him good (71/17). Camus himself calls him a lover of the sun that leaves no shade (viii), which, of course, cannot apply to the crucial episode when Meursault, oppressed by the sun, longs for the shade. Meursault is generally happy on the beach. He also delights in watching the sky and its changing colors. His enjoyment of nature is not merely a sensuous or aesthetic pleasure, but seems to reach that mystical union which Camus himself describes in his early essays (*EN*, p. 110; *N*, p. 38). During a night of love he leaves the window open, because it is good to feel the "summer night flowing over the brown bodies" (55/11). Toward the end of the novel, the "wonderful peace" of the summer night penetrates him like a tide. When he "opens up" to what he calls the "tender indifference" of the world and finds it "brotherly," one wonders whether it is "for the first time" he has had this experience. Although in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (p. 36) man is considered to be a stranger to himself and to this world, Meursault cannot be called a good example of either kind of alienation.

There can be hardly any doubt, however, that Meursault is a stranger to society. As Camus states in his "avant-propos" (vii), "il est étranger à la société où il vit, il erre, en marge, dans les faubourgs de la vie privée, solitaire, sensuelle." (One might perhaps question both "errer" and "solitaire"). He is, according to Camus, not play-

⁷ *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode (New York, 1947), p. 386.

⁸ S. Freud, "Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychoanalyse," *Gesammelte Werke*, xii (London, 1955), 9.

⁹ F. Kafka, *Tagebücher* (New York, 1949), p. 350.

¹⁰ S. John, "Image and Symbol in the Work of Albert Camus," *FS*, ix (1955), 47. Cf. also Gershman, p. 302, Th. Hanna, *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago, 1958), p. 40, and John K. Simon, "The Glance of Idiots: The Novel of the Absurd," *YFS*, No. 25 (Spring 1960), p. 118.

¹¹ John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (London, 1959), p. 166.

ing society's game, because he does not lie, even where and when everybody lies in order to simplify life, and because he rejects time-honored formulas, such as expressing regret after a crime, even when this rejection means the death sentence. Whether this actually stems from a "deep, though silent passion for the absolute and for truth" is debatable; this passion being too silent to be noticeable. To be sure, he is not only sincere when he refuses to pretend before the investigating judge that he feels genuine remorse, but also when he refuses to pretend to Marie that he loves her, and his sincerity makes him even say dogmatically that one is never allowed to pretend (99/22). Yet when he congratulates his lawyer in court, he is aware of not being sincere, and his testimony in behalf of Raymond at the police station is not a proof of his absolute sincerity either.

Meursault may also be termed a stranger to society because of his unconventional ideas about love, marriage, and how to get ahead in a job. Love, a conventional concept according to *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (p. 102), does not mean anything to him, and marriage, a conventional basis of society, is not a serious matter. He also declines the opportunity of going to Paris. Not to have any professional ambition is an affront to modern society. Meursault antagonizes society also by his "friendship" with the pimp Raymond and, above all, by not displaying the usual signs of grief at and after the burial of his mother.

Meursault is also a stranger to society because he sometimes feels left out. In the courtroom he has the bizarre impression of being just an intruder (103/14). Though he is sometimes tempted to "intervene" in the proceedings, he is told by his lawyer to keep quiet. His own trial seems to be held without him and his fate is decided without anyone asking him about his opinion (116/13). He is "reduced to zero" precisely by somebody who "acts" in his interest and who, according to convention, identifies himself with him by using "I" many times when he speaks of him (121/4). Meursault's helplessness during the proceedings in court may be symbolic of man's precarious place in a mass society whose workings he does not control nor even understand and whose leaders may speak in his name to further their own interests.

Meursault not only disregards some of society's time-honored conventions, but also some of its most valued achievements. Unlike another "stranger," Jean Péloueyre in Mauriac's *Le Baiser au lépreux*, he makes no reference to his former studies. Literature, philosophy, science,

art do not seem to exist for him. No great personality, living or dead, is ever named in the book. Although he went to a university (62/20), there are only a very few instances which would indicate that his education might be more than elementary. Raymond obviously assumes that Meursault can write better to his prostitute mistress than he himself could. Meursault remembers having learned in school something about the guillotine and about the events of 1789 (the only historical fact mentioned in *L'Etranger*). He apparently read some mystery novels (84/7, 99/25) and also thinks he should have read books dealing with executions. These are rather few and strange examples of the education society has given him. His short, "disconnected" sentences and his almost exclusive use of the *passé composé* may also be taken to be—among other things—a rejection of school rules and conventional writing.

This negative attitude toward culture perhaps reaches its climax in that unbelievable description of Paris, the cultural center of his nation: "C'est sale. Il y a des pigeons et des cours noires. Les gens ont la peau blanche" (63/21). This is not meant to be funny. Meursault does not crack jokes and Marie does not laugh when she hears it, although she usually laughs at almost anything. It seems that *L'Etranger* is directed not only—as it has often been noted—against the *Pharisiens* but also against the *Parisiens*. Camus, of course, has often been critical of Parisian life and society, comparing it with the happier and more natural life in sun-drenched Algeria (*EE*, pp. 95 ff., 101, 131; *EN*, p. 16).

However, this stranger to society never attacks society as such. He is not an anarchist or a rebel, he does not accuse or deride the judicial system, even praises some of its features (83/24), and is, according to the warden, the only prisoner who understands and approves certain punitive aspects of prison life. He is a law-abiding citizen, holds a steady job, works hard and well, and wears a black tie and a black armband as a tribute to convention. He is respectful to everybody, including the authorities ("Oui, monsieur le Directeur," "Oui, monsieur le Président") and does not deny conventional politeness: He thanks the director for arranging a religious funeral and later for attending the funeral. He compliments Masson on his cabin and thanks the newspaperman for his friendly words. He never uses offensive language.

Meursault, the stranger to society, never speaks of "society," although the public prosecutor and the papers do (119/6, 21; 120/3). It is

"the others," who have condemned him (136/17), that faceless, anonymous, undistinguishable group of people that sit in the jury box as well as in the streetcar and judge any new arrival.

A word that is stressed by Camus in connection with estrangement, especially in his *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, and has perhaps become the most popular word of his philosophical vocabulary, is "absurd." It has confusingly different meanings,¹² and often is synonymous with "indifferent" or "stranger"-like. Meursault, therefore, has also been called an absurd man,¹³ his style "style absurde,"¹⁴ and *L'Etranger* an absurd novel or a novel of the absurd.¹⁵ In the novel the word is used only once. In his outburst at the end Meursault calls his life, not life in general, "absurd." But "absurd" has no meaning without the assumption of a meaning, and it is not clear which meaning Meursault thinks or feels his life has been lacking. This somewhat corresponds to the "poor joys" of his life he speaks about (122/10), which imply great and real joys, of which, however, there is not the slightest intimation in the novel.

According to the terminology and the illustrations of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (p. 86), Meursault's basic indifference is absurd, since the absurd teaches that all experiences are indifferent. In addition, some of his experiences can be called absurd, such as that of the "inhuman landscape" and that of the independent reflection in the mirror of his tin can. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (p. 29) Camus also calls the uneasiness absurd which one feels on discovering how non-human men really are and how mechanical their gestures can be. In *L'Etranger* Meursault is fascinated by the little woman who one day sits down at his table in the restaurant. Twice he calls her "bizarre," and he even follows her to watch her (64 f.). Her gestures have the precision of an automaton. This woman automaton, as he calls her (123/2), observes him in court as intently and seriously as the young newspaperman. Since the latter is to some extent Meursault (and Camus) himself (104 f.), this encounter with her may indicate his discovery of his own mechanical way of life. The jerkiness (*saccadé*) of her gestures also corresponds to the frequent jerkiness of his style. But the "femme automate" is not a "reflection" nor a "more extreme version of him."¹⁶ He lacks her "incredible" precision, speed, and assurance. Also, Meursault apparently sees "la mécanique qui écrasait tout" (129/13) not in his life but in his execution. By the woman automaton Camus may have intended to symbolize the mechanization of mod-

ern life in this story that uses the style of modern American fiction.

"Indifference," which plays a key role in Camus's world, is a concept related to estrangement and absurdity and often synonymous with either. His teacher, Jean Grenier, wrote an essay "De l'Indifférence,"¹⁷ and the original title of Meursault's story was "L'Indifférent." In the preface to the 1957 edition of *L'Envers et l'endroit*, Camus diagnoses a deep indifference in himself which is like a natural weakness and has to be corrected (*EN*, pp. 14, 25). In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, however, he finds a *noblesse profonde* in indifference and sees that man at an advanced stage will nourish his greatness with the wine of absurdity and the bread of indifference (pp. 108, 75). The world reveals to him a serene indifference to everything (*EN*, pp. 62, 76). The sky, in particular, is indifferent (*EE*, p. 33), has an inane, indifferent smile (*EN*, p. 49), pursues with the earth an indifferent dialogue (*EE*, p. 55), and is even indifferent to the "atrocious victories and just defeat of Nazi Germany."¹⁸ But it also has charm, beauty, sweetness, and tenderness (*EN*, pp. 63, 98; *MS*, p. 28; *N*, p. 27). This "explains" the paradoxical "tendre indifférence du monde" in the last paragraph, when Meursault looks at the starry sky.¹⁹

Meursault is never called "indifferent" in the novel, but a group of hostile Arabs watch Raymond's house with indifference (70/3) and the court reporters seem indifferent (104/25). It is clear from these two occurrences that indifference is not identical with apathy, but rather with lack of emotionalism. Meursault displays indifference at the death of his mother, at Raymond's offer of friendship, at Marie's desire to marry him, and at his employer's proposal to transfer him to a Paris office. After his mother's death "nothing has changed" (43). One cannot change one's life; at any rate, all lives are of equal value (62). Meursault's indifference is probably not congenital,²⁰ like Camus's, but the result of a

¹² Germaine Brée, *Camus* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1959), p. 203; R. W. B. Lewis, *The Picaresque Saint* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 60; Cruickshank, p. 63.

¹³ J.-P. Sartre, "Explication de *L'Etranger*," *Situations*, 1 (Paris, 1947), 107; Picon, p. 114.

¹⁴ Robert Luppé, *Albert Camus* (Paris, 1960), p. 76.

¹⁵ Cruickshank, p. 163; Simon, p. 111.

¹⁶ Murray Krieger, *The Tragic Vision* (New York, 1960), p. 148.

¹⁷ Brée, p. 24.

¹⁸ A. Camus, *Lettres à un ami allemand* (Paris, 1948), p. 87.

¹⁹ The "tendre indifférence" is a somewhat stronger version of the "indifférence bienveillante" in Camus's *Le Malentendu* (Paris, 1957), p. 42.

²⁰ *Situations*, p. 109; Maquet, p. 40.

drastic experience of an undisclosed nature. The break came when he had to give up his studies and ambitions (62/20). Now he knows that "all that" has no real importance and in various situations he repeats the slogan of indifference: "It's all the same to me." The prospect of impending death shakes his indifference considerably, although he tries to maintain it by looking at the sky (129/18), and in his violent anger at the chaplain, he even loses it to some extent, but only to regain and reaffirm it on a higher, lyrical, or mystical level. Again he maintains that nothing has any importance, that all lives and men are equal (because of death); but now with the "stars on his face," he feels that the world's "tender indifference" is penetrating him. As he finds the world brotherly now, it is a kind of mystical union, not with mother nature, but with brother world. Whereas the end of the first part, which leads to a violent death, is dominated by tension, hostility, destruction, and misfortune (*malheur* is the last word of this part), the end of the second part leads Meursault, who expects a violent death, to vague feelings of truce, peace, tenderness, brotherhood, and happiness. The last word (*haine*) is harsh again, but it means in its context the conquest of solitude and the reconquest of indifference.

Although Camus once states that "those are very poor who need myths" and that Algerians live without any myths (*N*, pp. 18, 77), he himself reinterpreted or recreated old myths and perhaps created some new ones. In particular, his *L'Etranger* has been thought of as embodying various old and new myths. The multiplicity of mythical interpretations points definitely to the suggestive intensity of Camus's novel, but perhaps also to the elusive vagueness or to the abuse of "myth" as a literary term. A French critic sees in *L'Etranger* the only mythical expression of contemporary man, an expression so perfect that by itself it could give future generations a clear picture of present-day humanity, especially its self-alienation.²¹ A British critic, while agreeing that *L'Etranger* could be interpreted as a modern myth, sees in Meursault not a figure representing modern self-estrangement, but rather "man's metaphysical status as an outsider" in the world.²²

Meursault, the "doomed man," is also seen as an Oedipus figure.²³ Obviously, however, Oedipus' all-important relationship to his mother and father has no parallel in Meursault's life. And whereas fate dominates the old myth and prediction is possible, it is an unpredictable chance, "le hasard," that leads Meursault into disaster.

Since *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* was written and published shortly after *L'Etranger*, Meursault has often been likened to the "hero-antagonist of the gods." The endlessly recurring toil of Sisyphus seems to correspond to the long and dull routine of the office clerk Meursault.²⁴ Though the "symbol of Sisyphus takes on a number of connotations" in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*,²⁵ there is one passage illustrating "une vie machinale" which apparently fits Meursault's life: "Lever, tramway, quatre heures de bureau ou d'usine, repas, tramway, quatre heures de travail, repas, sommeil et lundi mardi mercredi jeudi vendredi et samedi sur le même rythme . . ." (*MS*, p. 27). One notices that the days of the week are not separated by commas and flow into each other like the days in Meursault's prison life: "Pour moi, c'était sans cesse le même jour qui déferlait dans ma cellule et la même tâche que je poursuivais" (100/6). But Meursault is no present-day Sisyphus. No days are mentioned in *L'Etranger*, except Saturday and Sunday, Meursault's days off. Sisyphus, moreover, has no days off, nor can he indulge in sunbathing, in swimming in the blue sea, in love affairs with Marie and other girls, in walks in the beautiful countryside, as Meursault can, who also goes to the races, plays billiards, may go to the movies on two workdays a week, and likes living in his neighborhood. More important, Meursault never complains about the tediousness, emptiness, or difficulty of his work. On the contrary, one of the reasons why he dislikes Sundays is probably that he is not doing his routine job (another one is that Sundays in Algiers are very "sinister," *N*, p. 72). It is precisely the dullness and superficiality of their every-day work that gives many people a sense of security and achievement and an escape from frightening questions, loneliness, and despair. In an early essay Camus writes of those office hours against which we protest so loudly, but which protect us safely against the suffering of solitude. He has always wanted to write novels where his protagonists would say: "Qu'est-ce que je deviendrais sans mes heures de bureau?" or "Ma femme est morte, mais par bonheur, j'ai un paquet d'expéditions à rédiger pour demain" (*EN*, p. 109).

While representing the myths of modern man,

²¹ Picon, p. 114.

²² Cruickshank, p. 116.

²³ Carl A. Viggiani, "Camus' *L'Etranger*," *PMLA*, LXXI (1956), 870.

²⁴ Lewis, p. 71; Viggiani, p. 870.

²⁵ Brée, p. 203.

of Oedipus, and Sisyphus, Meursault is also said to be a reincarnation of the myth of Christ. Indeed, it is almost generally believed that this little office clerk, who cannot feel sad at his mother's death, who does not believe in a life hereafter, who kills a fellow-man, who does not seem to have any set of moral values, and who, consequently and perhaps not quite jokingly, is called "Mr. Antichrist" by the investigating judge, is a Christ figure,²⁶ a tragic hero who takes upon himself the burden of humanity,²⁷ a "sacrificial victim,"²⁸ or the "scapegoat of a society of pharisees and Pilates."²⁹ Camus himself calls him—"paradoxically," as he says—"the only Christ we deserve" (viii). True, Meursault is like Christ a "victim of a judicial error,"³⁰ is like Christ unprejudiced toward social outcasts, and is executed at approximately the same age Christ was. But, in spite of Camus, one cannot see how Meursault "accepts to die for truth." He does not "incarnate truth,"³¹ he does not die *for* the sake of sincerity, but *because* of his sincerity (whatever the causes of his sincerity may be), because his attitude is not "conventionnelle, c'est-à-dire comédienne."³² 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.

It is also rather difficult to see how the sea and the sun are used as "mythic religious symbols" in *L'Etranger* and especially how they are "associated in Camus's mind" with the mother and the father.³³ The homonymy of *mère* and *mer* does not mean much, since most of the time Meursault calls his mother "maman." It is impossible to see the connection between the colorless, boring old woman, as Meursault sees his mother, whom he hardly cares to visit at the old age home, and the fascinating and beautiful Mediterranean, which he likes to watch and where he enjoys swimming. And while the sun is in *L'Etranger* the most powerful force, the father is weakness personified. All that Meursault knows about his father is that he vomited after witnessing the execution of a stranger, whereas his "stranger"-son finally expects his own execution with a feeling of near elation. As for the other "father," Mr. Pérez, he is the only full-blown caricature in the novel. He has an ugly face, wears ridiculous clothes, collapses at the cemetery like a puppet, and makes everybody in court laugh at him. This pathetic or ridiculous old man does not at all correspond to the brilliant or overpowering sun of *L'Etranger*. The man with the "visage détruit" (36/4) has nothing to do with the "symbol of destruction." In short,

it is not easy to accept any of the mythical interpretations of *L'Etranger* without reservations.

Considerable attention has been focused on the style of the novel, mainly because of its allegedly philosophical implications or foundations. Sartre's remarks in his "Explication de *L'Etranger*" have been generally subscribed to by other readers: "La phrase est nette . . . fermée sur soi; elle est séparée de la phrase suivante par un néant. Entre chaque phrase et la suivante le monde s'anéantit et renaît: la parole dès qu'elle s'élève est une création ex nihilo . . . Et nous cascadeons de phrase en phrase, de néant en néant."³⁴ Another critic thinks likewise that each sentence is a small, homogeneous, and closed universe and that there is no logical or other relation between one sentence and the next one.³⁵ The short, "disconnected" sentences are also said to mirror the small events in Meursault's life, which has no unity.³⁶ Still another critic states that the "deliberately discontinuous style reflects the discontinuity of experience which is a major element in Camus's conception of the absurd,"³⁷ and gives the following "typical" example: "Il s'est alors levé après avoir bu un verre de vin. Il a repoussé les assiettes et le peu de boudin froid que nous avions laissé. Il a soigneusement essuyé la toile cirée de la table. Il a pris dans un tiroir de sa table de nuit une feuille de papier quadrillé, une enveloppe jaune, un petit porte-plume de bois rouge et un encrier carré d'encre violette. Quand il m'a dit le nom de la femme, j'ai vu que c'était une Mauresque. J'ai fait la lettre" (51/25-52/6).

The style in this passage may be somewhat clumsy (*il a . . . il a . . . il a*; setting and style, incidentally, recall Subévert's "Déjeuner du matin"), but it has subordinating conjunctions (*après, que, quand, que*), an enumeration (the four items in the drawer), and is admirably

²⁶ Viggiani, p. 887; Louis Hudon, "The Stranger and the Critics," *YFS*, No. 25, p. 61; Henry Bonnier, *Albert Camus ou La Force d'être* (Lyon, 1959), p. 117.

²⁷ Lewis, p. 68.

²⁸ Brée, p. 113; Gerald Kamber, "The Allegory of the Names in *L'Etranger*," *MLQ*, xxii (1961), 295.

²⁹ Pierre de Boisdefre, *Une Histoire vivante de la littérature d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1959), p. 127.

³⁰ A. Koestler—A. Camus, *Réflexions sur la peine capitale* (Paris, 1957), p. 171.

³¹ Maquet, p. 41.

³² Koestler—Camus, p. 162.

³³ Viggiani, pp. 873-878.

³⁴ *Situations*, p. 117.

³⁵ Maquet, p. 44.

³⁶ Armand Renaud, "Quelques remarques sur le style de *L'Etranger*," *FR*, xxx (1957), 290, 295.

³⁷ Cruickshank, p. 155.

sued to the *boudin froid*, the *toile cirée*, the *papier quadrillé*, and in general to the tawdriness of Raymond's room and existence and his poor educational and social background.³⁸ Above all, one does not quite sense in the quoted passage the "discontinuity of experience," nor does one get the impression that Meursault is "incapable of apprehending continuity and logical sequence."³⁹ There is, to be sure, a shortage or lack of certain conjunctions in *L'Etranger*, but Meursault is not mad or delirious. He does not offer scraps of disconnected sensations, descriptions, and thoughts, but a continuous and coherent account of a rather difficult phase of his life. One can, furthermore, be nihilistic, absurd, or illogical in long-winded sentences, complete with *pour peu que*, *à moins que*, *si tant est que*, and, on the other hand, be constructive, vibrant, and perceptive in "staccato style." Moreover, if one sees a close link between Meursault's "absurd style" and the experience of absurdity, then not only is Meursault an "absurd man," but also the other persons who speak his language, such as the director of the old age home (23, 83/14), the concierge (27), Raymond (49), Masson (73), Pérez (109), and Céleste (110).

There is another and weightier reason why the connection between "absurd style" and absurd experience seems overstressed. One particular observation on this absurd style seems almost incredibly erroneous. Sartre pretends that all *liaisons causales* are avoided.⁴⁰ A British critic thinks that "in place of the coherence indicated by *ainsi* or *parce que* we find the simple succession of *et* and *puis*,"⁴¹ and an American critic remarks that there are no causal relations. "Meursault's favorite conjunction is the colorless 'and'—never 'since,' 'because,' or 'therefore.'"⁴² There are, however, quite a number of *parce que* in the novel (22/11; 23/21; 25/2, 31; 26/27; 28/22; 29/26; 34/15; 37/12; 38/27; 39/14, 17; 41/15; 44/11; 45/20, 26; 47/13; 50/24; 52/7, 23; 54/6; 58/6; 61/8; 62/1; 65/9, 23; 66/16; 68/3, 5, 11; 71/16; 72/19; 73/9; 74/3; 79/10; 85/24; 88/26, 28, 30; 89/31; 92/10; 94/26; 95/1, 29; 105/2, 22; 106/7, 12, 24; 108/18; 117/16; 118/25; 121/3; 122/24; 124/11; 127/22; 130/12; 133/26; 136/20; 138/6). Thirty-five of these sixty examples even occur in the first, more "absurd," part of the novel. In addition, there are instances of the causal *comme* (22/25; 25/11; 26/10, 25; 34/6; 38/24; 51/22; 63/15; 64/23, 27; 65/29; 108/11; 113/29; 117/8; 120/18), of *car* (65/5; 87/26; 95/10; 98/11; 127/17; 128/6), *puisque* (66/20; 100/18; 102/21; 130/8; 131/2; 132/10; 137/17), *par suite* (128/13), the con-

junction *ainsi* (21/7; 99/23; 128/2), *donc* (131/12, 14), *c'est pourquoi* (40/19; 130/1), and *c'est pour cela que* (23/30; 50/20). One may add the instances of *à cause* (22/16; 23/18, 19; 36/2; 68/10; 79/16, 21; 93/23; 103/3; 120/25; 121/31; 128/25, 26).

On the average, there is one causal link a page and one *parce que* on every other page. The lack of causal connections in *L'Etranger*, therefore, is the critics' rather uncritical invention; Meursault does not live in a world where causality has been "carefully eradicated."⁴³

Far from avoiding subordination and even coordination, except for "brefs raisonnements,"⁴⁴ *L'Etranger* even contains sentences, particularly in the second part, that attain the rank of *périodes* with their well-balanced complexity. These sentences may also have other stylistic devices that are inconsistent with an "absurd" style: 88/18–23 has a subordinate clause of the third degree (a clause dependent on another clause, which in its turn is dependent on a dependent clause); 98/11–16 has an object of the fourth degree; 105/2–10 has a subordinate clause of the third degree in addition to a parenthesis and an enumeration; 112/2–6 has an enumeration of three *que* clauses and a parenthesis; 113/23–28 has a subordinate clause of the third degree in addition to three times *par hasard que*; 122/7–11 has a colon, five objects and two alliterations (*s* and *r*); 124/6–10 has a subordinate of the third degree and an alliteration (*s*); 126/21–27 has four parallel *que* clauses and a parenthesis; and

³⁸ Germaine Brée makes the sensitive observation that the brief, discontinuous sentences of his uneducated mother haunt Camus's books (*Camus*, p. 14).

³⁹ Ullmann, p. 244.

⁴⁰ *Situations*, p. 118.

⁴¹ Cruickshank, p. 155.

⁴² Lewis, p. 69. Similar statements are made by Ullmann ("short, disjointed sentences, unconnected by any causal link," p. 254), Thody ("a prose style that systematically avoids causal expressions like 'because' and 'since,'" Philip Thody, *Albert Camus*, London, 1961, p. 44), S. John ("Camus deliberately suppressed all causal connections," *Camus*, ed. G. Brée, p. 88; "casual" in the book is an apparent misprint for "causal"), John K. Simon ("non-causal conjunctions," *YFS*, No. 25, p. 113), and Brian T. Fitch ("ne sent pas la nécessité d'établir un lien logique entre ses phrases qui correspondrait à un lien causal entre ses actions," *Narrateur et narration dans L'Etranger d'Albert Camus*, Paris, 1960, p. 31).

⁴³ Sartre, *Situations*, I, 124. A rapid, perhaps too rapid check of novels by Stendhal, Flaubert, Gide, Proust, Duhamel, Mauriac, Colette, Giono, Robbe-Grillet, and Sartre would indicate that Meursault's story is second only to Proust as far as the frequency of causal conjunctions is concerned.

⁴⁴ Robert Champigny, *Sur un héros païen* (Paris, 1959), p. 87.

130/13–18 has a repetition of *même si*. There are other parentheses (92/9; 131/12) and there is another subordinate of the third degree (132/32). Comparing such sentences with others in the novel, one cannot endorse Sartre's view that "all sentences in Camus's book are equivalent."⁴⁵

Sartre also thinks that the use of the *passé composé* in *L'Etranger* instead of the *passé simple* tends to strengthen the "solitude" of each sentence and the impression of discontinuity.⁴⁶ The indefiniteness of the *passé composé*, according to a British critic,⁴⁷ also emphasizes that gratuitous and arbitrary quality of experience which is associated with the absurd. These explanations sound rather strained and unconvincing. The major reason for the use of the *passé composé* in Meursault's story is its non-literary or perhaps even anti-literary character. And then there is the old grammatical rule that the *passé composé* is used when the action is recently completed and leads up to the present. The famous beginning, "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte," could never read "Aujourd'hui maman mourut."

Meursault uses the *passé simple* six times. Curiously enough, all six cases involve verbs of the first conjugation. Two (*frappa, donna*) are on the same line (33/5), two others (*passèrent, arrivèrent*) are separated by only two pages (40/15, 42/3), and the last two (*causèrent, dura*) by three pages (93/27, 96/17). In the first edition of *L'Etranger*, Camus used three verbs of the first conjugation in the first person singular of the *passé simple* in close proximity to the six verbs in the third person of the *passé simple*. *Je regardai la campagne, je la remarquai, and je m'avançai*, however, were replaced in the 1953 Gallimard edition by *Je regardais la campagne and je l'ai remarqué . . . en m'avançant* (pp. 26, 106). Although all instances probably are Camus's lapses into grammatical correctness, one may perhaps explain *donna* by the "donna" in the preceding *ordonnateur* ("L'ordonnateur nous donna . . .") and *passèrent* and *arrivèrent*, instead of the informal *sont passés* and *sont arrivés*, by the fact that they refer to the young men who are dressed in their elegant Sunday attire. It should be noted that it is the "absurd" Meursault who occasionally uses the allegedly non-absurd *passé simple*, not, for instance, his defense lawyer or the prosecutor. When these two men offer their versions of the crime, they are not quoted verbatim, in all likelihood to avoid the use of the *passé simple*.

While shunning the *passé simple* of the educated, Meursault is less wary about the imperfect of the subjunctive, a verb form which is at

least as literary as the *passé simple* and related to it. There are quite a few instances where he avoids it by using the present subjunctive, but there are others where it can be found, mostly in the second part: 27/25; 66/19; 80/16; 84/1; 85/19; 86/19; 88/21, 22; 90/14; 126/12; 128/14, 19; 129/22; 133/21; 135/17 (*connusse!*); and 137/28, 30. There are also some cases of the pluperfect subjunctive: 36/6; 90/15; 125/11 (*eussent échappé!*); and 129/4 (*fusse avisé!*).

In addition to Meursault's "absurd" language and the highly polished style of the *périodes*, there are other levels of language in *L'Etranger*. Sartre notes that Camus, in "rare moments," writes poetry.⁴⁸ Meursault, however, also uses a colorless business language ("Ce sera une affaire classée et tout aura revêtu une allure plus officielle," 22/6; "On le lui rendrait moyennant le paiement de quelques droits," 59/11; "La fourrière gardait les chiens trois jours à la disposition de leurs propriétaires," 59/24), faithfully renders Raymond's picturesque Algerian slang, the "pataouète,"⁴⁹ as well as the bombastic forensic tirades of the prosecutor, and even has an ear for and a comment on stylistic idiosyncrasies, such as Masson's "et je dirai plus" (71/12).

As to the poetic style in *L'Etranger*, which many readers feel does not fit Meursault at all, it has been found in Camus's works that when the mood of a character is outside his ordinary experience, he is forced to go beyond the ordinary resources of his language.⁵⁰ This would explain the sudden "explosion of metaphors" in the last three or four pages of the first part.⁵¹ Much imagery is concentrated in that crucial episode, perhaps to provide a motivation for Meursault's crime.⁵² One may find the whole scene overwritten, despite or because of some brilliant images, but neither here nor elsewhere in the novel does one sense a "distrust of rhetoric and the belief that it obscures the real nature of experience."⁵³

Whereas Camus, according to a critic's count, uses twenty-five metaphors in the last four pages

⁴⁵ *Situations*, I, 120.

⁴⁶ *Situations*, I, 117 f.; Ullmann, p. 246; Roger Quilliot, *La Mer et les prisons* (Paris, 1956), p. 85.

⁴⁷ Cruickshank, p. 160.

⁴⁸ *Situations*, I, 120.

⁴⁹ E. Roblès, "Jeunesse d'Albert Camus," *NRF*, VIII (March 1960), 413 f.

⁵⁰ W. M. Frohock, "Camus: Image, Influence, and Sensibility," *YFS*, No. 4, p. 99.

⁵¹ Viggiani, p. 882.

⁵² Cruickshank, pp. 157–158; Ullmann, p. 273.

⁵³ Cruickshank, p. 158.

of the first part in the original edition, there are only fifteen in the preceding eighty-three pages.⁵⁴ Some of these preceding metaphors (one may perhaps count a few more than fifteen), however, are hauntingly beautiful or strikingly original: *éclaboussement soudain de la lumière* (26/22); *nid de rides* (28/7); *les lèvres toutes mangées par leur bouche sans dents* (28/8); *la même campagne lumineuse gorgée de soleil* (34/23); *nuée de chaleur* (35/9); *la chair blanche des racines* (36/8); *nid de lumières* (36/11); *une promesse de pluie* (41/11); *des grappes de spectateurs* (41/14); *noyé dans le bruit et la poussière* (45/6); *des mâts qui dansaient* (45/9); *souffle obscur* (53/4; this synesthesia is repeated in a figurative meaning on 137/12); *visage de fleur* (54/9); *de petites vagues longues et paresseuses* (54/13); *sentir la nuit d'été couler sur nos corps bruns* (55/11); *au cœur du silence* (76/28). These metaphors cannot stem from a "disapproval of rhetoric."⁵⁵

Other stylistic devices used by Camus which seem to be contrary to "disconnection" as well as to a "distrust of rhetoric" are enumeration, repetition, and alliteration. On 22/15 there are two enumerations, one of two units, modified each by one item (*cette hâte, cette course*), and a second enumeration of three units, the first not modified, the second with one modifier, the third with two modifiers (*cahots, odeur d'essence, réverbération de la route et du ciel*). There are several lists on 35/2–7. Others are on 45/7–11, 58/12 (five verbs), 78/14 (*j'avais envie de plus infinitive plus one object, j'avais envie de plus infinitive plus three objects, j'avais envie de plus infinitive plus two objects*), 79/5 (plus repetition of *le même*), 88/5–7 (four verbs), 104/8–12 (three verbs, three *de plus infinitives*), 112/22–26 (five *que*), 115/7–13 (six subjects), 117/12–15 (six objects), 120/20 (three *que*), 120/27 (three *que*), 128/10 (three nouns, the first modified by a past participle, the second by a past participle and an adverb, the third by a past participle and a clause). The details given with some of these examples show that these enumerations are not just mechanical or accidental additions but skillfully arranged structures.

Some of the repetitions were mentioned in connection with the *périodes* and enumerations. Others are on 131/18–21, 136/29 (five *sâr*), 137/3 (three *j'avais raison*), 137/15, and 138/26. The last pages are characterized by the repetition of two items in the beginning of the sentence. The second item immediately follows the first one and is modified: *A ce moment, à ce moment seulement* (131/15), *Comprenait-il, com-*

prenait-il donc (137/20; repeated also on 137/31), *Là-bas, là-bas aussi* (138/16). *Personne, personne n'avait le droit* (138/20) is similar.

There seems to be onomatopoeia on 30/1 ("il crachait dans un grand mouchoir à carreaux et chacun de ses crachats était comme un arrachement"). There is perhaps an *s* alliteration or onomatopoeia in some passages describing silence: 76/18, 77/11, 95/18, 124/7. Other alliterations are on 60/3 (*p*), 65/2 (*p*), 79/27 (*l*), and 96/5 (*écrasé, écartelé, et crispé, écrit*). There may be some internal rime on 73/22 ff. (*tombait, d'aplomb, surplombaient*).

The last two paragraphs of the first chapter stand out for their importance and literary artistry. The first of these paragraphs contains an enumeration (*le soleil, l'odeur . . .*), repetitions (three *perdu*, four *noir*), and alliterations (35/1–6: *bouilli-boue, peu-perdu, bleu-blanc, gluant-goudron, cuir-crottin, voiture-vernis*). The last paragraph ends in an enumeration of twelve items that contains three metaphors, one simile, one parenthesis, two relative and two temporal clauses (a true *période*), and conveys the impression of rapidity, especially when compared with some of the slow rendition of conversations and observations, such as the immediately preceding five lines on Mr. Pérez' tears. The two items referring to the burial proper ("la terre couleur de sang qui roulait sur la bière de maman, la chair blanche des racines qui s'y mêlaient") surprisingly contain the words "flesh" and "blood." Thus the very symbols of life cover the coffin. The last item of the enumeration is even "joie." The burial of Meursault's "maman" seems itself buried, and doubly so, in a succession of events and in a triumph of life over death and joy over grief. There is a parallel burial of the burial in the shorter and more subdued enumeration at the end of the second chapter, which also ends with a startling statement: "J'ai pensé que c'était toujours un dimanche de tiré, que maman était maintenant enterrée, que j'allais reprendre mon travail et que, somme toute, il n'y avait rien de changé." Surely, the passages just mentioned are not good examples of "plain prose" or "without expressive effects."⁵⁶

Meursault's style, particularly his use of tenses, leads to the problem of the point of view of the novel. When and to whom did he tell or write his story? One may perhaps consider

⁵⁴ Frohock, pp. 93–94.

⁵⁵ Cruickshank, p. 156.

⁵⁶ Viggiani, p. 882; Ullmann, p. 246.

it as a series of interior or exterior monologues, judging partly by the passage in which Meursault discovers in his prison cell that he was talking aloud for months without recognizing his own voice (100/18). But it is impossible to determine the situations when he would engage in these lengthy monologues, quote long speeches, recall banal conversations, and describe his daily life. Meursault's point or points of view seem as elusive as he is.

Each of the six chapters of the first part relates the events of one or two days and at first sight looks like the entry of an imaginary diary covering eighteen days. The second part describes, in retrospect, the events and thoughts of about thirteen or fourteen months of imprisonment.⁵⁷ Chapters i and ii have *aujourd'hui* in the first sentence, but each chapter covers two days. Chapter i has even another *aujourd'hui* which refers to the second day (33/22). Chapter iii also begins with *aujourd'hui* and narrates the events of one day (Monday), but we cannot imagine the sleepy and tired Meursault (52/22) returning to his room and going over all the happenings of the day, which fill nine pages. Chapter iv is according to some statements (54/5, 55/13) told on a Sunday, but must have been told after that Sunday according to another statement (60/5). Chapters v and vi, though dealing with one day each, do not contain any *aujourd'hui*, *ce matin*, or similar references and could hardly have been told on these days. *Le dimanche* in the beginning of Chapter vi, which tells the events of the fatal Sunday, excludes that Sunday as the day of narration.

The novel does not even start as if Meursault were telling a story, but shows him before or around noon as he thinks about the next two days, using the present and the future, with the exception of a reference to his leave from the office. Only with the third paragraph the story proper starts, "J'ai pris l'autobus à deux heures," while Meursault still in his planning stage says: "Je prendrai l'autobus à deux heures." To make matters perhaps more difficult, there are numerous other sentences where Meursault foregoes the *imparfait* and his famous *passé composé* and uses the present tense.⁵⁸ Some instances can be explained as general statements (39/9, 15; 89/19; 96/9; 99/22; 100/25; 116/1; 117/1; 128/16; 129/31; 131/1), or for other reasons (22/22, 27; 26/1-4, 25; 30/12; 31/26; 70/10-11; 102/11; 103/12; 129/8-10). Most instances, however, are elusive: *Je crois* (27/17, 28/10, 29/18, 38/3, 40/22, 73/10, 102/27, 110/15, 121/10, 123/28, 124/15, 127/16, 128/25, 130/19, 138/6),

je me souviens (29/21, 122/4), *je ne sais plus* (29/21), *je ne sais pas* (25/17, 44/4, 60/4, 95/16, 128/23, 136/21), *je ne me souviens plus* (35/18), *si je puis dire* (86/6), *je peux dire* (90/26, 98/28, 101/1, 116/3, 130/7), *je ne veux pas parler* (100/13), *je ne peux pas dire* (102/17), *je sais bien* (102/21), *je dois reconnaître* (116/17), *je dis* (128/15), *je veux dire* (128/26). The first paragraph of the last chapter is particularly rich in examples (125/2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9; 126/6, 9). When is Meursault supposed to have used these present tenses?

There are, on the other hand, imperfect tenses when one would expect the present tense. Why "L'ami de Raymond habitait un petit cabanon" (70/26), contrasting with "L'asile est à deux kilomètres du village" (22/22)? Why "C'était un grand type" (70/20), contrasting with "C'est un petit vieux" (22/27)? Why "Plusieurs d'entre elles, que je connaissais" (42/10), but "un petit homme assez frêle que je connais" (40/12)? Why "J'étais jeune" (97/6), or "Il y avait certainement des ouvrages spéciaux" (126/1), or "Le condamné était obligé de collaborer" (128/18), and "il me restait à souhaiter" in the last sentence of the book? Why is there no sentence in the present at the end? The last chapter contains statements in the present tense, such as the last *je ne sais pas pourquoi* (136/21) and the last *je crois* (138/6), that express experiences which Meursault must have had after his experience conveyed in the last sentence. These references to the present of the narrator, however, do not contain any significant facts and are hardly noticeable. The *imparfait* ending of the novel may, therefore, give the impression that Meursault's story is cut off a short time before his head is.

One critic suggests that Meursault tells the whole story during his last hours.⁵⁹ Another critic thinks that the whole story is told at the beginning of the last chapter.⁶⁰ Several objections may be raised to these assumptions. It is highly unlikely that Meursault would spend his last hours recalling so many trivialities, especially after having reached a new and lyrical height or depth of indifference; or that he could even

⁵⁷ The difference in the points of view between Parts I and II, however, is not expressed by the fact that the *passé composé* of Part I is replaced by the *imparfait* in Part II (Quilliot, p. 86); there is no such replacement.

⁵⁸ Some critics ignore it altogether: Quilliot, p. 85, sees the *imparfait* and the *passé composé* only; Bonnier, p. 109, denies Meursault's usage of the present and the future.

⁵⁹ Champigny, pp. 146-147.

⁶⁰ Brian T. Fitch, pp. 29 ff.

recall at that time so many details, quote different speeches, and furnish exact time data. To change the natural point of view so as to make the first part a quasi-diary seems much too artificial and too literary for Meursault. The difference in style in the two parts remains unexplained. The whole story is not told in the shadow of the guillotine; it leads to the end, not from the end. If this were not the case, Meursault could not have avoided some reference in Part I to experiences in Part II. The only passage where events in Part II seem to be foreshadowed, is the impression, which Meursault has in the morgue, that the old men are there to judge him (28/13); but this is much too vague and too fleeting an impression, and Meursault himself calls it ridiculous.

To locate the present of the narrator in the beginning of the last chapter is unacceptable. Why would the chaplain after Meursault's violent fit ask for another conversation with him? How could Meursault then just comment "Je n'ai rien à lui dire" and why doesn't he at least slightly allude to his angry outburst: "Je n'ai plus rien à lui dire"? How can he say "Ce qui m'intéresse en ce moment, c'est d'échapper à la mécanique" after having been "emptied of hope" and looking forward to a large crowd witnessing his execution? The first paragraph of the last chapter is—in spite of the frequent use of the present tense—definitely prior to the rest of the chapter. This also weakens the argument that the many *je crois* and similar expressions in other chapters of the novel point to Meursault's last hours, to a time after the last chapter.

Furthermore, there are numerous sentences in the first part where Meursault uses the present tense to introduce or describe his neighborhood and his daily routine, much in the way of someone who would explain certain basic facts of a story he tells. Meursault thus describes his apartment (39/21–25), the street (40/4, 24), the office (44/10–12, 45/1, 61/8), Salamano and his dog (46/1–26), Raymond (47/10–17, 24–27), Emmanuel (44/16, 54/3–4), and other men he knows (40/12, 56/7). These passages strengthen the belief that Meursault tells the first part of his story on different days and, except for Chapter vi, before his imprisonment. Otherwise, for instance, the present in a sentence like "Raymond often speaks to me" (47/12) would not make sense. "The old man walks his dog twice a day" in Chapter iii (46/10) can only be stated before Chapter iv, when Salamano has lost his dog.

Camus's treatment of time in *L'Etranger* shows the puzzling juxtaposition or interweaving of precision, vagueness, and silence so characteristic of the whole novel. The time of the day is often stated (seven-thirty, ten o'clock, and—particularly important in Camus's world—two o'clock); so are the days of the week (Saturday, Sunday, and by implication Monday, Thursday, Friday). Of the months only June, the last month of the court sessions, is mentioned, in addition to August, when Meursault, Masson, and Raymond intend to spend their vacation together; of the seasons only summer. No day of the month and no year (except the historical 1789) are given. Often the data are rather vague: "The hour without name," "one day." The length of time is sometimes precise (two hours, two days, five months, eight years), sometimes vague (for many days), sometimes disregarded. We don't know Meursault's age (he is "young"), nor the month in which he killed the Arab. By implication, since the investigation alone lasts eleven months and the trial is held in May or June,⁶¹ we may assume that he committed the crime either in the latter part of May, or in June, or perhaps in the beginning of July.⁶² Because of the excessive heat during the funeral and the crime and Meursault's mention of summer as the time of the crucial events (101/1), the month of May is somewhat doubtful, and the month of June is the most likely time when the crime is committed and the trial is held.

There is nothing unique about Meursault's experience of time in prison, where the days seem to him both long and short, their names lose all significance, and they seem to form just one long day (99/28 f.). Nor is there any peculiarity about the fact that he finds unpleasant stretches of time very long. The three quarters of an hour that the funeral procession lasts seem to be an eternal ordeal. The three quarters of an hour he has to wait in court for sentencing are "very long" (123/27).

It is not correct that "once . . . the second half begins, time almost ceases to have any significance at all. The first six chapters contain a large number of references to time, but the last five virtually ignore it."⁶³ There are numerous references to time in the first four chapters of

⁶¹ The trial does not necessarily "begin during the latter part of June" (Viggiani, p. 868); Meursault only says that the sessions of the court end at that time (101/4).

⁶² Certainly not in August, despite Viggiani, p. 867.

⁶³ Cruickshank, p. 158; see also Lewis, p. 69, and Brée, p. 105.

Part II, some vague (*quelques jours après*, 93/3; *quelques mois*, 96/17; *les premiers mois*, 97/13; *quelques semaines*, 98/18; *les derniers mois*, 98/29; *soir*, 115/3); but some precise: *huit jours après* (83/4), *deux heures de l'après-midi* (86/13), *onze mois* (90/25), *seize à dix-huit heures, six heures* (98/29 f.), *vingt-cinq ans* (99/8), *cinq mois* (100/6), *deux ou trois jours* (101/7), *sept heures et demie du matin* (101/11), *trois quarts d'heure* (123/27).

Events that took place only a few weeks ago—such as thoughts about Marie—seem to Meursault in his death cell very remote (132/4, 132/5, 135/17, 138/13). But one cannot agree that there are “no precise time indications” in the last chapter and “time has vanished” there.⁶⁴ Meursault is very much aware of time, especially of the short supply available to him (133/21, 136/13). There are quite a few time indications, such as *toutes mes journées* (125/6), *la seconde* (127/1), *ces moments* (127/5), *l'instant d'après* (127/22), *un matin* (128/27), *aube* (192/30), *l'heure douteuse* (130/4), *des milliers d'années* (131/3), *ce moment* (131/15, 132/12, 133/23), *soir* (132/1), and *des mois* (135/15). Some references are very precise: *à vingt heures plutôt qu'à dix-sept* (126/21), *minuit* (130/5), *vingt-quatre heures* (130/18), *trente ans, soixante-dix ans, vingt ans* (131/1, 5, 8, 10), *une heure* (131/23). We also know that the events of the last chapter take place in “summer” (132/1, 138/10), that is July, August, or even September, following the trial. Only in this chapter the date of a year (1789) is indicated. Time is essential in the last chapter, since Meursault's fears and meditations are based on the shortness of man's and particularly his life.

There are misconceptions not only concerning the philosophical or mythological significance of *L'Étranger*, its style, point of view, and role of time, but also about its central character. Meursault is not just a human automaton.⁶⁵ His sensations, far from being “elementary and crude,”⁶⁶ are very acute. As for his sight, he enjoys different hues of the sky and perceives three shades of black at a time (35/3). He notices all the details of the faces and the clothing of his mother's friends at the wake (27/26), and before the funeral procession he does not even miss the blackheads on Mr. Pérez' nose. At a time when he should be thinking of his dead mother, he observes and records trivialities. He spends a Sunday afternoon watching a dull street and looking at the sky (41/12). What seems to be in Part I a constant overemphasis

on visual sensations and observations at the expense of feelings and thoughts, is perhaps explained by Meursault's attitude in Masson's cabin, when he is left alone with the two women. Their fears and tears annoy him, so he stops talking, lights a cigarette, and watches the sea (75/23). When in his death cell he tries to get rid of certain obsessive thoughts, he watches the sky (129/18). It thus seems that his external observations are like his routine job a defense mechanism against boredom, worries, fears, and self-examination. He “does not want to see his mother,” he does not want to see himself either, so he looks attentively at anything, Mr. Pérez' ears or his lawyer's tie. This stress on observation and description may also be the influence of the American novel (*HR*, p. 327) or of phenomenology.

The “man of silence,”⁶⁷ of “virile silence,”⁶⁸ has also some fine sensations of sound: “Leur murmure sourd, parti de plus bas, formait comme une basse continue aux conversations qui s'entre-croisaient au-dessus de leurs têtes” (94/4). When taken back from court to prison, he hears his cherished symphony of the evening: the cries of the newsdealers, the last birds, the calls of the sandwich sellers, the screeching of the streetcars, and the lyrical and puzzling “rumeur du ciel avant que la nuit bascule sur le port” (115/7). But he is particularly fascinated by silence. He can feel an “island of silence” amidst a confusion of voices (95/19), the silence of a packed courtroom rising toward him (124/7), as well as the “exceptional silence of the beach” (80/13), but above all a curious symbiosis of silence and sound: “La plainte est montée lentement comme une fleur née du silence” (the end of Chapter III, first edition), “le petit bruit d'eau et de flûte au cœur du silence” (76/28), “le double silence de la flûte et de l'eau” (77/12), and especially “les bruits du soir montaient de tous les étages de la prison dans un cortège de silence” (100/14).

Meursault's olfactory keenness is remarkable. At one time during the funeral procession he distinctly smells four odors (of leather, dung, varnish, and incense, 35/5); he can also smell the shade (101/13), the evening (115/2), the night

⁶⁴ Viggiani, pp. 868–869.

⁶⁵ Jean-Paul Weber, “Découverte de Meursault,” *NRF*, VIII (March 1960), 577; cf. Luppé, p. 70.

⁶⁶ Luppé, p. 70.

⁶⁷ Maurice Blanchot, “Le Détour vers la simplicité,” *NRF*, VIII (May 1960), 933.

⁶⁸ *Situations*, I, 107.

(27/16), and the summer (122/9). His favorite smell seems to be that of salt, i.e., the sea (30/14, 39/11, 138/9). When Marie has left him one morning, he even looks for the odor of salt which her hair has left on the pillow (39/10). Towards the end, the combined odors of the night, the earth, and the salt refresh him. The odors of the summer are first in a list of five "joys" of his life (122/9). In Camus's essays we not only meet the "odor of salt" (*EE*, p.86), and the "odor of the shade" (*EN*, p. 110), but also the "odor of silence" (*EN*, p. 110), and the "scent of the stars" (*EN*, p. 97; *MS*, p. 35).

There are no particular sensations of touch in Meursault's story, except perhaps for the delight he experiences when using the rolling towel at noon time. His taste appears to be rather simple, judging from what he eats, drinks, and cooks.

Meursault is not a "rudimentary being without any inner life;"⁶⁹ his emotions are more than skin-deep. He even speaks several times about his heart (123/8, 126/7, 127/21; on 129/21 and 130/13, 17 this is physical). His violent remarks to the chaplain come from "the bottom of his heart" (130/25). His conversation with the investigating judge gets "more cordial" and he even wants to explain something to the prosecutor in a cordial, almost affectionate manner. In court he also has the urge to embrace good old Céleste (111/14). In addition to his heart, he refers to his imagination (126/10, 129/12), and although he thinks he never had any real imagination (129/23), he can, for instance, picture himself living in the trunk of a tree (96/21).

The contention that all his experiences are "equivalent"⁷⁰ has to be qualified. He has his likes (cigarettes, coffee, swimming, girls, watching the sky, taking walks, certain smells, evenings, Algiers) and dislikes (police, brothels, Sundays, white skin, Paris). His "indifference" does not prevent him from finding certain things "interesting" (26/8, 47/14, 51/19, 102/5, 116/1). Far from living in a state of continuous apathy, gloom, or "torpor,"⁷¹ he often feels "satisfied," as in the evening (45/25, 115/6, 14) and while swimming (71/23), even "happy," when walking home along the "quays" (45/23). In retrospect, he finds that he was happy on the beach (80/14), and even at the end that he has been "happy" all his life (138/26). He also knows some "joys" in his allegedly automatic existence (36/10, 122/9, 136/25).

Though Meursault can hardly be called an intellectual, he is not "stupid" or "without

thought."⁷² He thinks, understands, and evaluates. There are numerous instances of *penser* (21/12, 38/28, 40/18, 42/1, 42/21, 43/2, 58/9, 60/4, 65/2, 71/6, 74/11, 96/21, 104/1, 106/6), *réfléchir* (27/1, 30/22, 62/19, 87/29, 90/4, 93/9, 96/28, 98/20, 105/22, 107/14, 124/18, 128/6, 129/16, 132/6), and especially *comprendre* (32/23, 33/20, 37/1, 37/10, 51/14, 62/22, 73/27, 80/2, 92/2, 97/22, 98/1, 98/21, 100/22, 102/16, 106/21, 108/28, 114/27, 117/6, 118/7, 127/12, 132/14, 134/7, 134/18, 138/15). An additional sign of his reasoning is the use of *réflexion* (116/17, 130/21), *raisonnable* (84/11; 127/21, 26; 129/27), *raisonnement* (131/13), *raisonner* (129/17), *raison* (62/18, 65/11, 123/22, 131/13), *plausible* (117/19, 131/22), *évident* (123/21), and *considérer* (123/22, 126/14). The supposedly illogical Meursault even blames the investigating judge for lack of logic (87/27) and brands his acting *déraisonnable* (89/14). Although critics are unanimous in considering the lack of transition as a trademark of his style, he himself sees lack of transition in others (87/23). He also has an understanding for the vagueness of a term, such as *le peuple français* (126/25).

His seriousness is deep-rooted. He never jokes, never laughs, and his face remains serious even when he tries to smile (100). In this respect, too, he is different from Sartre's Pablo in "Le Mur," whose final indifference ("rien n'avait plus d'importance"), reminiscent of Meursault's similar statements (27/1; 62/22; 63/2; 137/9, 15, 16, 23, 28), makes him find everything funny, play a practical joke, and laugh until tears come to his eyes.

Though he does not like to reminisce, since he is mostly concerned with the present and the immediate future, he can spend hours in prison just recalling things in his apartment (98/18) and, as his story shows, has an excellent memory for facts and words.

Having a sense of normality, proportion, and propriety he can use terms like *ridicule* (28/13, 88/29, 90/25, 104/1, 120/25, 121/12, 126/19), *drôle* (39/2, 129/4), *niais* (102/21), *bête* (39/3), *stupide* (79/23, 108/17), *étrange* (88/7), *normal* (132/14), *sérieux* (84/3), *invraisemblable* (99/20), *naturel* (26/16, 35/18, 66/20, 78/25, 90/23, 99/20, 106/7, 118/22, 126/12, 127/26, 131/2, 21, 133/17), and *bizarre* (29/15, 60/3, 64/7, 65/2,

⁶⁹ Quilliot, pp. 85, 90.

⁷⁰ *Situations*, I, 120.

⁷¹ Luppé, p. 70; Ullmann, p. 245.

⁷² Blanchot, p. 933; Cruickshank, p. 159.

103/14, 105/1, 124/12).⁷³ He sometimes evaluates and interprets data less on the basis of his observation and thinking than on the strength of his feeling, empathy, or intuition (29/12, 29/16, 35/27, 112/16, 121/30, 124/13, 138/19).

Quite apart from his basic "indifference," he reveals a certain philosophy of life: "Il y a plus malheureux que moi," 96/28; "Il ne faut rien exagérer," 96/9; "On s'habitue à tout," 97/1; "On ne sait jamais ce qui peut arriver," 125/15; "On ne peut pas être toujours raisonnable," 127/26; "On se fait toujours des idées exagérées de ce qu'on ne connaît pas," 129/6; "On n'est jamais tout à fait malheureux," 130/10; "La vie ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue" (130/24). Some of his statements are startling in their insight or boldness: "On est toujours un peu fautif," 39/1; "On ne change jamais de vie," 62/12; "Il ne faut pas jouer," 99/22; and especially "Tous les êtres sains avaient plus ou moins souhaité la mort de ceux qu'ils aimaient" (85/10). Some passages which express philosophical ideas, and some of those which show a subtle perception of things or reveal lyrical emotions, may, however, arouse many a reader to ask whether it is really Meursault himself speaking, or whether it is not rather Camus relaxing his artistic control.

Camus in the "avant-propos" calls Meursault "un homme pauvre et nu." Indeed many a reader may sympathize when seeing poor Meursault suffer from an excess of light and heat, or dine on *boudin*, or "lost" in the forensic maze, or subjected to monstrous accusations. To be sure, there also are extenuating circumstances for his crime: the preceding scuffle, the beginning of a sunstroke, the lack of premeditation,⁷⁴ the excessive consumption of wine, the feeling of the hostility of the world, the reflex (or defensive) nature of the first shot. But Meursault is no innocent, as most critics assume,⁷⁵ unless one adopts the "absurdist" point of view, which "makes murder at least indifferent" (*HR*, p. 15). Meursault's deed is not altogether an accident or a stroke of bad luck, as his friends in the courtroom and the magazines have called it.⁷⁶ It comes as a climax: First, Masson, Raymond, and Meursault walk on the beach, then Raymond and Meursault, and finally, Meursault alone; at first, Meursault tries to prevent Raymond from shooting, then he thinks that one could shoot or not shoot, which is not a very innocent thought, and finally he does shoot. As he stands by the body of the dead man, he does not even feel that he has committed a crime.⁷⁷ He under-

stands that he has destroyed the equilibrium of the day and the exceptional silence of a beach (80/12)—which is a credit to his feeling for nature—but he does not feel that he has also and above all destroyed a human life. He has to be told that he committed a crime (134/25) and actually remains to the very end a "stranger to his crime."⁷⁸

Meursault's "real" crime in the eyes of our society is not to have cried at his mother's burial (vii, 137/23), or, as the prosecutor puts it, to have buried his mother with a criminal's heart (114/23). The behavior at the burial and the crime have, of course, no connection, as Meursault rightly points out to his lawyer (86/1), but the author shows society to be grotesquely and devastatingly unjust to someone who flagrantly violates its most essential rules (120/3). Meursault blames his apparent callousness on his tiredness and sleepiness (85/16), which sounds weak, particularly since, according to his own words, he was not sleepy on the day he buried his mother (30/19). It is perhaps irrelevant whether he should have cried or even whether he really loved his mother, whom he keeps calling "maman," but it is rather remarkable that before, during, and after the burial he hardly even thinks of her and never thinks of his childhood. To make things worse, he is, intentionally or unintentionally, paired with Salamano, who, when he loses his repulsive dog, remembers his own and the dog's life, does not know what is going to become of him (59/24), and cries at night tears that are not prescribed by convention. His life has changed now (66/25), whereas Meursault's has not (43/5). He is lost because his dog is lost. That he forgets most of the bad qualities of the dog is human, whereas Meursault, who hardly recalls even one quality of his mother, creates a bewildering effect which certainly does not endear him to the reader.

Paradoxically Meursault gets even more elusive when he reaches what is generally assumed to be "lucidity"⁷⁹ at the end. The light which illuminates for him his past life and life in

⁷³ This together with 63/12 is more than just "two or three times," Viggiani, p. 880.

⁷⁴ J.-C. Brisville, *Camus* (Paris, 1959), p. 53.

⁷⁵ *Situations*, I, 104; Maquet, p. 41; Brisville, p. 54; Champigny, p. 139; Luppé, p. 75.

⁷⁶ Gershman, p. 304; Hudon, p. 61.

⁷⁷ The opposite view is held by G. Brée in *Albert Camus, 1913-1960*, ed. Cultural Services of the French Embassy (New York, n.d.), p. 4.

⁷⁸ Gershman, p. 303.

⁷⁹ Maquet, p. 39; Viggiani, p. 870; Luppé, p. 75.

general is not bright sunshine, but seems to come from the stars which he sees. His rejection of a future life, his reaffirmation of indifference, his contention that death equalizes all men and makes everything look unimportant, seem clear, in spite of the passionate tone; his lyrical reflections at the very end, when he has regained his calm and reached the height of lucidity, are the least clear passages of the whole novel.

It seems to him that he now understands why his "maman" took a "fiancé" at the end of her life. "Là-bas, là-bas aussi, autour de cet asile où des vies s'éteignaient, le soir était comme un rêve mélancolique." But he "understood" her already at the funeral when he heard about her evening walks with Mr. Pérez (33/20). At that time he also thought that the evening in that countryside was a melancholy truce. At the end, however, there is truce, but no evening and no melancholy mood. Still more baffling is the last sentence: "Pour que tout soit consommé, pour que je me sente moins seul, il me restait à souhaiter qu'il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu'ils m'accueillent avec des cris de haine." It is very strange for Meursault to wish to be hated in his last moments, especially since the people in court had only *considération* for him, when he was condemned to death, and the gendarmes were even *doux*. No explanation of this surprise ending is entirely satisfactory. Those who see in Meursault a Christ figure recall "the last moments of Christ, whose crucifixion was preceded by cries of hatred from the crowds."⁸⁰ But then one must also explain why Meursault suddenly and consciously identifies himself with Christ or parodies him. When one thinks that Meursault deserves the hatred of the people because he "has denied their myths,"⁸¹ and they see in him the symbol of their fate, which is usually masked by myths,⁸² one overlooks the fact that Meursault does not speak of *expecting*, but of *wishing* those cries of hate; also he has never been aware of his denying collective myths or of his being a symbol of something. When one believes that Meursault "wants the crowds to be there because he wants society to give some sign that it realizes how much he defies it,"⁸³ one forgets that the death penalty is a clear enough sign of how society regards him.

Meursault's strange last wish is above all proof of the firmness of his indifference in contrast to his attitude in court where the mere sight of people who, as he thought, detested him, made him feel like crying. He actually does not ex-

press that strange wish, but he feels the desirability or necessity of it; that wish probably means the ultimate height of tender indifference, which he thinks he has not achieved yet, but may or will very soon achieve.

The number and the violent reaction of the spectators are, of course, also a sign that people care about him, but a possible connection with the Salamano episode seems to be more enlightening. The only other time "haine" is employed in *L'Etranger* is to denote Salamano's feelings toward his dog (46/20). The old man even constantly uses what might be called "cris de haine" toward his dog: "Salaud, charogne." Since after his presumably violent death the hated dog makes his former master cry with affection and unhappiness, Meursault's possible identification with the generally detested dog may be an indirect way of expressing his desire to be remembered well by the people who despised him before his death. Meursault's identification with a dog at the time of his execution recalls Josef K., who in Kafka's *Der Prozeß* is executed at the end "like a dog."⁸⁴

Meursault's final illumination does not quite illuminate him in the eyes of the reader, who is left in the dark about the narrator's outward appearance (except his complexion), about his first name, and, above all, about his childhood and youth. In addition, Meursault shows baffling inconsistencies in his attitudes and actions. At ten in the morning he barely manages to walk three quarters of an hour because of the sun, but he walks the same distance at four o'clock the day before after a bus ride without any complaints; he takes a sunbath the day after, races after a truck and jumps on it at

⁸⁰ Viggiani, p. 887.

⁸¹ Cruickshank, p. 181; Simon, p. 117.

⁸² Brée, *Camus*, p. 113.

⁸³ Thody, p. 40.

⁸⁴ The manner of Josef K.'s execution and his last words, "like a dog," are mentioned in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p. 172. The identification of a man with a dog is probably foreshadowed by two passages: one in which Salamano and his dog are said to look as if they belonged to the same race (46/9), and one in which Meursault likens his breath to that of a dog (130/17). Furthermore, the dog, who lives on the same floor as Meursault, dies the way Meursault—in his death cell—wants to die (126/10 f.): He escapes (his collar corresponds to the prison as well as to the blade of the guillotine) only to be killed after a few moments of freedom. It may be worth-while adding that the rue de Lyon—the only street named in *L'Etranger*—which is mentioned only in connection with the dog whom Salamano walked there for eight years (46/13), is the street where Camus himself used to live as a youngster.

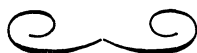
twelve-thirty two days later, and enjoys lying in the sun for hours. He shuns the "effort" to climb a few wooden steps, but instead takes a long walk in the broiling sun. He first wants to "see his mother right away" (22/23), but then repeatedly declines to see her (25/1, 31/3). He does not care about Sundays (39/9, 43/2), but does not want to waste a Sunday visiting his mother (23/21). And why does he keep Raymond's revolver? And why does he (as well as the prosecutor) mistake the day of his mother's burial for the day of her death (38/25, 112/1, 18; is this another "burial of the burial"?)

These are some of the puzzles which the numerous critics of the book have failed to solve or even to notice. Prompted by their philosophical

preoccupations, some have in ingenious "superstructures" discussed ill-defined alienations or discovered non-existent myths and "absurdities," while they often failed to see obvious facts and to explain disturbing difficulties. One ventures to hope that careful and searching attention will turn to the "properly esthetic" facets of the book,⁸⁵ such as the varied style and the enigmatic point of view. *L'Etranger* itself will continue radiating its charm and challenge.

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⁸⁵ G. Brée, "A Grain of Salt," *YFS*, No. 25, p. 41. I am indebted to Professors Germaine Brée and Donald Frame for valuable criticisms of this article.



THE BIOGRAPHER is called upon to take the base metals that are his disparate facts and turn them into the gold of the human personality, and no chemical process has yet been discovered by which this change can be accomplished. . . . To succeed the biographer must perform the unusual—and the well-nigh impossible—act of incorporating into himself the experience of another. . . . This does not mean that he must be an actor. The actor gets into the skin of a character and remains that character on stage, wholly dissimulating his real self. The biographer also is required to get into the skin of his subject; he removes himself sometimes to another age, sometimes he even changes his sex; he takes on another's career, the very wink of his eye or shrug of his shoulder: yet all the while he retains his own mind, his own sense of balance and his own appraising eye. He must be warm yet aloof, involved yet uninvolved. To be cold as ice in appraisal, yet warm and human and understanding, this is the biographer's dilemma.—Leon Edel *Literary Biography*, "Subject."