

NOTES AND REVIEWS

The Myth of Sisyphus and The Stranger: Two Portraits of the Young Camus

Speaking of *The Stranger*, Jean-Paul Sartre observed in 1947 that "in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which appeared a few months later, Camus provided us with a precise commentary upon his work."¹ And certainly the absurd reasoning developed at length in that essay seems to speak directly to the strange indifference of Meursault and his final happy acceptance of a world without meaning. Sartre's view, however, has not found much acceptance among contemporary critics, who justly mark the difference between creative and philosophical truth.² That said, I would like to propose here that, in one sense, novel and essay are indeed commentaries on one another. It is that both are concerned with the epistemology of the human condition, with the changes that occur in man's perception of himself, his life, and his world as the individual process of existence runs its course. While *The Myth* presents Camus's development of absurdism as a *raisonnement*, that is, as a line of argument, the novel dramatizes Meursault's journey toward the epiphany which, on the eve of his execution, enables him to see clearly for the first time.

The Myth offers a sudden insight into a life whose only order is mechanical and artificial. This order is imposed by man himself on an experience otherwise gratuitous. To see through it is to begin to live thoughtfully: "Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness."³ The essay develops at some length the consequences of this newly conscious existence. One begins, Camus believes, by understanding the world's indifference and also the human desire for reason. If the terms of this dialectic are violated by neither the leap of faith nor by suicide, then man lives in the absurd, that is, in truth. And if he so persists, he is rewarded by a sense of freedom, by the impulse to revolt, by the life force of passion.

For absurd man, then, life has three stages. The theatricality of a daily routine ends with the realization that conventional wisdoms are invalidated by existence's ultimate meaninglessness. The feeling of absurdity which follows responds to the misproportion between the demands of consciousness for order and a confronting reality that offers none. But this misproportion, Camus argues, should not cause despair, but rather liberate man to enjoy the life given him unasked: ". . . completely turned toward death (taken here as the most obvious absurdity), the absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him" (pp. 43-44). Absurdity thus frees man

¹"An Explication of *The Stranger*," in Germaine Brée, *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 108.

²See Brian T. Fitch, *Narrateur et Narration dans L'Étranger d'Albert Camus*, 2nd. ed., rev. (Paris: Librairie Minard, 1968), especially pp. 8-12; also John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1960), pp. 142-63.

³*The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 10. All subsequent references will be noted in the text.

to grasp the whole of his life as a process completed in itself, since it lies outside any notion of universal justice. Camus in this way derives a new meaning from the familiar irony of *nascentes morimur*. For death, though not in any Christian sense, releases man to live.

The Myth goes on, of course, to explore some patterns of living which exploit most successfully an existence whose value is itself. Camus's concern here for an ethic of quantity finds no substantial reflection in *The Stranger*. Nor does Meursault resemble the conqueror. Don Juan, or the artist, those absurd types to whom the essay pays so much attention. But the epistemology of absurdism developed therein, a process of awareness undoubtedly parallel to Camus's personal experience, gives the novel its peculiar structure.

For all its superficial clarity, the first section of *The Stranger* puzzles and confuses. The events narrated are clear enough, but, presented with a first person narrative, we wonder why and when the narrator is telling his story. The use of present and *passé composé* verbs suggests a diary, but diary style is otherwise absent. The convention of first person narrative generally includes some information about the speaker, his purpose in writing, and the audience he addresses, even when, as in *Notes from Underground*, such indications deny the attempt to communicate itself. In *The Stranger* we are certain about what has happened, but uncertain about why we have been so informed. Why begin with the receipt of the telegram? Why end with the murder of the Arab? Here is a succession of events that lack what Aristotle calls *mythos*, the plot that imparts causality to experience's raw data. What Camus here presents is in fact a slice of the daily routine, devoid of intention and plot as it must be, a procession of events linked only by chronology. Event succeeds event, perception replaces perception, without any values by which the process may be interpreted.

Thus reproducing the daily routine's automatism has posed two insoluble technical problems for Camus. These are connected with the process of verbalization itself. First, the narrator, as Fitch has labored to show, must be placed in the present, looking back at this sequence of events. This *tranche* of experience, of course, has significance only because of what happened at the trial, where Meursault is convicted more for his mother's death in the asylum than for the Arab's on the beach. The narrator's viewpoint presupposes reflection and analysis. But Part I represents Meursault's apprehension of life *before* he is forced to assign it value and meaning. Second, by translating Meursault's consciousness (preconsciousness?) into language, Camus alters its character. Speech is an act of will, but the Meursault of Part I is someone without the will to speak. Finally, of course, the slicing of Meursault's experience, giving it a beginning and an end, confers a value on those events that destroys their significance as they were lived, without thought about a future that would judge and order them.

At this stage Meursault is hardly a stranger to society. He follows accepted forms, like work and ritual, as closely as he can. He accepts relationships with others. He takes some joy in what life has to offer. He is, as he maintains before the trial, just like everybody else. But Meursault is at this time a stranger in one important sense. Like others, he is a stranger to his own existence. He is more an instrument than an actor. He feels but does not reflect. The daily routine, after all, does not demand otherwise. Much that happens is all the same to him. He shows no capacity for emotion. In this humble acquiescence to what we consider everyday living, Meursault is like most of us. The examined life may well be the only life worth living, but the world seldom calls upon us to penetrate the opacity of our own experience.

Meursault, however, is elected to penetrate that experience by a bizarre and ultimately inexplicable series of events. Why does he pull the trigger? And why then does he fire four more shots into the Arab's lifeless form? The novel offers an unsatisfactory answer to the first of these questions (it is that the sun itself made Meursault fire) and no answer to the second. But these are valid questions only if the hero's portrait is ethically motivated, if he is to be seen as the champion of truth. Camus's disregard for these issues suggests otherwise. The murder figures simply as the given event that permits Meursault to understand himself and the human condition. The process of justice, as Champigny points out, reduces to absurdity the theatricality of society, which attempts to impose the *mythos* of causality on what happens.⁴ And so the events of Part I become the elements of a plot. We know there is no connection between Meursault's behavior at his mother's funeral and his shooting of the Arab. But the prosecution's attempt to establish one betrays the very human need for a *mythos*, for a connection between character and motive and between motive and action. Upon the unorder of Part I is imposed a disorder that the reader and Meursault as well must reject. Camus thus makes us feel the difference between the world as experienced and the world as men would conceive it. Meursault is jerked from his automatism as he is faced with a human order that is no more than a fatuous theatricality. He begins to live in the absurd. As in *The Myth*, however, it is death that finally liberates him to live.

For Meursault the trial and its consequences reveal death as the central fact of the human condition. Meursault in this way finds his sentence not an exile from human society, but the key to understanding his full involvement in the life of his fellow condemned. Appropriately, it is in prison that Meursault becomes the narrator of his own experience as he feels the need, served by words, of understanding what has happened and also the desire to communicate that understanding to others. He has the right now to speak, for he has become once again like everyone else. He is the representative of a human race sentenced without real cause to die. As he sees it, death orders life, conferring on all actions a perfect equivalence and on disparate destinies the same finale. But he does not despair. In *The Myth* Camus explains his rejection of solutions like the Christian to human life: "they relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone" (p. 41). At the end of the novel Meursault grasps the perfected destiny that is his. He discovers what he calls "the benign indifference of the universe," that is the cosmic meaninglessness which enables man to live his life as his own.⁵ Like Aeschylus's Cassandra, he recognizes the inevitability of his destiny and opens himself freely to it. Unlike Cassandra, however, he finds in that inevitability a happiness that overcomes all feelings of loss. In the shadow of death, he feels the urge to live, even if life at this point means only the memory of what has been lived. *The Stranger* and *The Myth* both propose a world without meaning in which death ends existence. Both works, the novel perhaps more dramatically, reject suicide as a solution to the dilemma posed by meaninglessness and mortality. Essay and novel trace instead a process of awareness that culminates in a paradoxical truth: that only in the shadow of annihilation can man discover his freedom, his passion, and, most of all, the grandeur of self-possession.

R. Barton Palmer
Georgia State University

⁴Robert J. Champigny, *A Pagan Hero: An Interpretation of Meursault in Camus's The Stranger*, trans. Rowe Portis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania UP, 1969), pp. 40-78.

⁵Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1946), p. 154.