Camus and the Novel of the "Absurd"

Victor Brombert

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The Stranger by Camus is a book which can easily baffle the reader. Is it a novel of ideas, does it contain a thesis, and what has the author set out to prove? Should it be judged as a psychological study of a pathological case, or is this case merely a symbol behind which are hidden larger meanings? Is it a "philosophical" novel, and if so, does Camus propose any solutions, or are his theories only negative and destructive? All these questions somehow arise even before it is possible to assess the artistic value of the book; and because these questions arise so early, the reader, taken by surprise, remains suspicious.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his Explication de l'Etranger, assumes that Camus's novel is not a "roman à thèse," that it tends to prove nothing at all, and that Camus, in writing it, has attempted only to set forth his theory of the "novel of the absurd." One does not quite see what subtle distinction Sartre makes between a "thesis" and a "theory." Moreover, after having stated that The Stranger calls to mind various other works "which lay claim to intrinsic value without proving anything," Sartre immediately hastens to explain the meaning of the very title of the book by reference to a passage in the Mythe de Sisyphe which Camus wrote several months after the publication of The Stranger: "... In a Universe suddenly deprived of illusions and enlightenment, man feels himself a stranger. This exile is without remedy since he is deprived of memories of a lost country or of hope for a promised land." Sartre is thus quite willing to admit the theoretical aspect of the character of Meursault, who is the "stranger" in this book. Now Meursault, in spite of his crime, is really not a criminal; for, according to the explanation given in the Mythe de Sisyphe, he is neither moral nor immoral—but simply absurd. Sartre evidently considers Camus's essay as the key to his novel. However, Sartre explains, there is a great difference between the essay and the novel: the Mythe de Sisyphe states the "notion" of the absurd, whereas The Stranger gives us the "feeling" of it. This distinction between "notion" and "feeling" may seem no less subtle than the one between "theory" and "thesis." For it is evident that a novel is not an essay, and that by a "roman à thèse" we mean a literary work in which the author, through his characters and moral situations, expresses his theories or beliefs. And although a "notion" is usually stated explicitly, while a "feeling" is merely suggested, it is hard to see why a thesis may not be contained in a
“feeling” just as it can in a “notion.” Sartre's approach seems inconsistent, since, in spite of his early assertion concerning the lack of theoretical content in *The Stranger*, his *Explication* is devoted almost entirely to a close study of the “notion” of the absurd.

Sartre's remarks are keen and challenging, as usual. “The absurd,” he writes, “is a condition as well as the lucid consciousness some people have of this condition.” This notion of the absurd or irrational aspect of life arises from various causes, all of which result from the divorce between man and the universe. For, indeed, nothing is intrinsically absurd: “To be sure, neither man nor the universe, if taken separately, is absurd; but since it is the essential nature of man to exist-in-the-world, the absurd becomes one and the same with the human condition.” The stranger, then, is man facing the world, man realizing the gap between the eternal nature of the universe and his own finite nature, and perceiving how much his worries are out of proportion with the futility of all his efforts. Even worse, man is not only a stranger facing the world, but a stranger also in relation to himself. That is what Sartre calls the divorce between the physical and the spiritual nature of man. Sometimes the stranger sees himself in a mirror, but does not recognize his own features. Such a realization of the absurdity of man’s fate inevitably leads to rebellion. If God does not exist, if nothing makes sense, then everything is permitted. All scales of value disappear. All experiences become equivalent and are to be measured quantitatively. To smoke a cigarette or to kill a man, to desire a woman or to gobble a meal, amount to the same thing. All these actions have the same value or lack of it, for all are equally devoid of real significance. Here, then, is the theoretical aspect of Meursault’s character. No character could in fact be more in contradiction with Sartre’s Existentialist beliefs: Meursault feels his loneliness, but does not even attempt to find a meaning for his life. He accepts conditions as they are, and shows not the faintest desire to change them. He knows himself overwhelmed by his own fate, but he does nothing to liberate himself. He lives neither in the past nor in the future, and consequently his very “present” is nothing but an eternal void. Nothing has meaning, there being no aim.

Sartre has pointed out with admirable insight how Camus succeeds in suggesting this divorce. Camus suppresses the connecting links between experiences. Imagine a large window behind which individuals talk and gesticulate. Their gestures and facial expressions are meaningless to us. The effect would be as grotesque as an opera scene to a deaf man. The consciousness of Meursault is precisely this “window” which Camus uses to filter all experiences. This consciousness, writes Sartre, is truly transparent: we see what it sees. “But it has been made so as to be transparent to things and opaque to meanings.” The “stranger” is thus perfectly passive: he records all events.
but he never reacts. The events of the external world as well as the events of his personal life have no meaning to Meursault. He does not perceive the causal links. And Camus intensifies this impression by writing most of the dialogues in an indirect style, as well as by the somewhat artificial but effective use throughout the book of the present perfect tense, which, as Sartre points out, "brings out the loneliness of each moment" by presenting all the events as an interminable succession of voids without connection.

These remarks by Sartre are on the whole valuable and pertinent. And yet the Explication de l'Etranger does not answer, and even seems to avoid, the most important question concerning any literary work, namely, its value as a work of art. One cannot help finding Sartre's critical method somewhat disputable. In his attempt to "explain" The Stranger, he first draws support from an essay by Camus in order to establish what the author wanted to express, and, having previously asserted that this novel is not a "roman à thèse," proceeds to show us how Camus communicates the "feeling" of a theory, the "notion" of which he has stated somewhere else. This method is disputable because it is neither logical nor truly critical. The reader is not supposed to have read the Mythe de Sisyphe. The critical essays of a writer can and should be used as a means to throw further light on his works, but they ought not to serve as a starting point. A literary work "explains" itself: it is both the communicating vehicle and the thing to be communicated. It seems impossible—unless the notion of the absurd be also carried over into the realm of criticism—to understand what the author wanted to say before realizing how he has said it.

In considering this preliminary aspect, it is not difficult to detect serious weaknesses in the composition, the style, and the tone of the novel. After the very first few pages, it becomes apparent that—whatever the symbolic meanings may be—the character of Meursault must be taken seriously, that is, at face value, and that the author aims at a certain "realism." Meursault, the stranger, is a weak and passive individual. He is even, one might add, too passive to be convincing. He is afraid of the world and supremely conscious of the futility of his own existence. He is also under the impression that the world judges him, although he does not quite know for what. He suffers from a persecution complex. He is afraid of responsibilities and of taking decisions. He is apathetic, taciturn, somewhat slow-witted. This, then, is Meursault, a man who disconcerts rather than exasperates us. But one feels also—especially as the book progresses—that there is a conscious attempt to make the reader think. Now to stimulate thought, silence and apathy are not sufficient; ideas are also needed. However, since the story is told by the stranger himself, Camus now and then has to breathe into Meursault's nostrils
the life of his own mind. This inevitably creates a certain tension, and the feeling in the reader that there is in the book something artificial, overly conscious, and calculated. At times Meursault expresses himself too well; at other times he is simply too stupid. In order to re-establish the desired lack of balance, Camus frequently shows us a Meursault who is so much a "stranger" to his own situation that one might be tempted to wonder (if the idea were not so grotesque) whether the pitiful hero of this story was not really a dry wit in disguise. Summoned to appear before the police magistrate after having killed an Arab for no apparent motive, Meursault claims not to need a lawyer:

I answered that I thought my case was very simple. He smiled, saying: "That's an opinion. Yet, there is the law. If you do not choose a lawyer, we shall designate one." I thought it was very convenient that the law took care of these details. I told him so. He approved, saying that the law was well made.

This is only one example, but one could point to many others. In particular, all the trivial remarks which make up a good portion of the book: he said yes, he said no, he washed his hands, he smoked a cigarette, he looked through the window, he smoked another cigarette, he was hungry—all this not only is tedious, but also too obviously calculated. It is the novel that ends up being absurd.

But even worse: Meursault, from time to time, awakens without any apparent reason from his lethargy, and reacts. His mind reacts; he thinks. But he thinks like Camus:

And were those speeches really different, after all? The lawyer raised his arms and pleaded guilty, but with extenuating circumstances. The public prosecutor stretched out his hands and proclaimed me guilty, but without extenuating circumstances.

or again:

I understood then that a man who had lived but one day could easily live a hundred years in a prison. He would have enough memories not to be bored.

This is not the same man who in the first part of the book could say: "I answered that I had not thought about it, but that it was interesting," or: "I said yes, but that in fact I did not care," or again: "I said yes, so as not to have to talk any more."

Occasionally, Camus cannot hold out against his own romantic temperament, and then the attempt at artistic discipline breaks down. We are surprised when Meursault, who otherwise expresses himself very unimaginatively in short and lifeless sentences, suddenly seems impelled by a burst of lyricism quite incompatible with his character:
Among the rows of cypress that led up to the hills near the sky, this reddish and green earth, these sparse and well-delineated houses, I understood Mother. Evening, in this country, must have been like a melancholy respite.

or again, when he is led back to prison:

. . . I found myself in my cell again, as if the familiar paths drawn in the summer skies could lead to prisons as well as to innocent slumber.

And even Sartre's remark that Meursault does not perceive the causal links of experience—which is true on the whole—is contradicted when Camus momentarily forgets to have the "stranger" play his assigned role:

. . . the local movies let out a stream of spectators into the street. Among this crowd, the young men displayed gestures that were more determined than usual, and I thought that they had seen some adventure film.

Quite a penetrating observation for a "stranger"!

There is no need to multiply the examples. But what is the cause of all these weaknesses? Basically, the character of Meursault is acceptable, though of meager interest. And so far as Camus presents Meursault as he had conceived him, he remains acceptable. But Camus also has "ideas" concerning this curious personage; and he has "ideas" about what he is supposed to represent. And here the difficulty begins: in order to express these ideas, Camus has to use Meursault as a mouthpiece. The "stranger" becomes his own interpreter as well as the interpreter of Camus's ideas. Moreover, since Meursault is the narrator, Camus has to strain the tone and use an idiom which is not Meursault's own. Hence Meursault, who is already at a loss to express his own thoughts (or lack of thoughts), finds an incongruous mode of expression forced upon him in order to express ideas properly the author's. One has the impression that neither Camus nor Meursault is quite sincere. Perhaps Camus should have written this book in the third person, which might have eliminated some of the more obvious difficulties. It remains problematic, however, whether such a device would have improved the book as a whole. To write a "novel of the absurd" with the preoccupations of a moralist is perhaps too ambitious an enterprise, requiring a fusion of thought and feeling which Camus apparently has not attained. This is not to deny Camus's moral and intellectual sincerity, as well as the considerable skill displayed in the writing of the book. These qualities, however, do not appear sufficient in themselves to secure the integrity of The Stranger as a work of art.