Journey to Consciousness: The Symbolic Pattern of Camus's L'Etranger

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ALTHOUGH a good deal has been written about L'Etranger in the light of Camus's philosophic insights in Le Mythe de Sisyphe, the verbal similarities between these two works have been used only sporadically in interpreting the novel. Carl Viggiani, whose essay on L'Etranger appears to have dealt most fully with the symbolic undercurrent of the novel and Meursault's relation to Sisyphus, has concentrated almost solely on detached archetypal motifs while largely neglecting any sort of progressive or "novelistic" development of the protagonist as he moves from his mother's funeral to his final jail cell. I propose to demonstrate such a consistent development by viewing Meursault's adventure as a parable of mental awakening or coming to consciousness which corresponds in detailed thematic and imagistic ways to the adventure of the mind in Le Mythe de Sisyphe.

Le Mythe, published less than a year after L'Etranger, contains Camus's impassioned search for a philosophic position which could clearly and steadily confront the inescapable facts of human isolation and mortality while yet remaining creative. He claimed the work was not designed to reveal a "philosophie absurde" but a "sensibilité absurde," an intention which is readily apparent in its poetic style and emotional tone. Camus's earlier work, L'Etranger, is quite as clearly concerned with man's consciousness in the face of ultimate realities. The novel is constructed around Meursault's three confrontations of death: his mother's death at the beginning of the tale, the Arab's death in the middle, and the prospect of his own death at the end. All three of these confrontations contribute to Meursault's growing consciousness of the sheer impersonality and human negation implied in death, and all three confrontations he attempts in one way or another to elude, but ultimately fails to do so.

Meursault's calm indifference to his mother's death in the opening scenes (he significantly feels more involved with his mother at the novel's conclusion) subtly gives rise to what Sartre terms a "sense of shock"; to the extent that death and grief are realities which do not touch this protagonist, his perfunctory behavior appears to reveal a deeper disengagement from reality than the word "unconventional" implies. Although the novel's personal point of view invites sympathy with Meursault, it is precisely the quality of sympathetic awareness that seems lacking in his attitude toward his mother, Marie, Céleste, Raymond, and his life in general in the first section; it is an attitude which is not as much "sincere" or "unhypocritical" as it is simply uninvolved. In the light of Camus's preoccupation with different states of consciousness in Le Mythe, it is suggested that Meursault's early behavior falls into a symbolic pattern which is characteristic of the novel as a whole.

Camus writes that the man who is unaware of the absurd condition lives a life of habitual day-to-day actions in a routine that smothers thought: "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, cette route se suit aisément la plupart du temps." Meursault, it will be noted, shows similarities to this man of habit (he is disturbed and apologetic about the break in clerical routine that his mother's funeral causes, and he is not attracted to the suggestion that he take a job in Paris), which in turn intimates that his indifference toward the funeral may be of richer import than the casual eye might suspect. It symbolically suggests a failure to face with full

2 Jean-Paul Sartre's now classic essay on L'Etranger ("An Explication of The Stranger," trans. Michelson, reprinted in Camus, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée, 1962, pp. 108–121), makes considerable use of Le Mythe de Sisyphe in general terms, but pays slight attention to the symbolic artistry and linguistic analogies which the association produces. Sartre's essay is the first to state flatly that Meursault does not achieve absurd awareness until the last page and that "He does not seem to pose himself any of the questions explored in The Myth of Sisyphus" (p. 114). The present study would show that the protagonist's absurd consciousness is a progressive pattern of development and that the "uncomplicated spontaneity" and lack of "self awareness" and "coherence" that John Cruickshank (to cite a more recent critic) finds typical of Meursault throughout the novel is not an accurate description of the Meursault of Part II, and is only partially accurate regarding the Meursault of Part I. Cf. John Cruickshank, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt (New York, 1959), p. 143.

8 Albert Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, 18th ed. (Librairie Gallimard, 1942), p. 27. Page references throughout the text are to this edition. Other page references in the text are to the Librairie Gallimard editions of L'Etranger, 82d ed. (Paris, 1942), and Noces (Paris, 1950).
The Symbolic Pattern of Camus’s “L’Étranger”

consciousness the implications of death itself, the first duty of the absurd man.

In these terms the descriptive details of the funeral proceedingstake on a hitherto unremarked importance. The continual insistence on “whiteness” and “light” in the mortuary, for example, where Meursault maintains his sleepy vigil, takes on a special resonance when viewed in association with metaphors of intense consciousness in Le Mythe. The mortuary is “une salle très claire, blanchie à la chaux et recouverte d’une verrière” (p. 13); within the room is an Arab woman with a “sarrau blanc,” a doorkeeper with a “mous-tache blanche,” and a sick woman with a white bandage about her face: “On ne voyait que la blancheur du bandeau dans son visage.” The effect of light on all this whiteness is to make the “petite morgue” into a place which reverberates painfully against Meursault’s eyes. When the doorkeeper puts on the lights, he remarks “j’ai été aveuglé par l’éclaboussement soudain de la lumière” (p. 16), and later asks that one of the lights be extinguished. The doorkeeper tells him it is not possible.

In the face of this stark reality, Meursault’s impulse is to doze as he feels constantly fatigued in this room of death. Yet even as he tries to shut out the situation he is being made uneasy. A group of figures enters: “C’est un frémement qui m’a réveillé. D’avoir fermé les yeux, la pièce m’a paru encore plus éclatante de blancheur. Devant moi, il n’y avait pas une ombre et chaque objet, chaque angle, toutes les courbes se dessinaient avec une pureté blessante pour les yeux. C’est à ce moment que les amis de maman sont entrés. Ils étaient en tout une dizaine, et ils glissaient en silence dans cette lumière aveuglante. . . . Je les voyais comme je n’ai jamais vu personne et pas un détail de leurs visages ou de leurs habits ne m’échappait. Pourtant je ne les entendais pas et j’avais peine à croire à leur réalité” (p. 18).

An insistent, repetitive emphasis on eyes and sight is noticeable in the above passage: “D’avoir fermé les yeux”; “une pureté blessante pour les yeux”; “Je les voyais comme je n’ai jamais vu personne”; and this emphasis is constantly in association with “lumière.” Such a concentration on eyes, sight, and light suggests a passage from Le Mythe which associates these images with awakening consciousness: “‘La prière,’ dit Alain, ‘c’est quand la nuit vient sur la pensée.’ ‘Mais il faut que l’esprit rencontre la nuit,’ répondent les mystiques et les existentiels. Certes, mais non pas cette nuit qui naît sous les yeux fermés et par la seule volonté de l’homme—nuit sombre et close que l’esprit suscite pour s’y perdre. S’il doit rencontrer une nuit, que ce soit plutôt celle du désespoir qui reste lucide, nuit polaire, veille de l’esprit, d’où se lèvera peut-être cette clarté blanche et in-tacte qui dessine chaque objet dans la lumière de l’intelligence” (pp. 89–90, my italics).

“The ‘nuit’ which has descended over the mortuary is not being met by Meursault, whose “vigil” (the same word “veille” is used in both works) resembles not the lucid encounter of the conscious intellect but the “yeux fermés” of comfortable thinkers. Striking similarities exist between Camus’s vigil of consciousness in Le Mythe and Mersault’s vigil of death in the mortuary. Each object in both is “dessiné”—outlined—by the light, and the light in both is a brilliant whiteness. Camus describes the life without absurd consciousness in Le Mythe as “une vie sans éclat” (p. 27), a metaphor which further suggests that Meursault’s weariness in the face of light may be metaphysically dramatic. Taken together, the above associations imply that Meursault’s failure to waken physically to his situation is symbolically associated with a more metaphysical failure to become aware of death’s profound implications.

The failure is not absolute, however. Mersault’s uneasiness and discomfort seem to hint that he is troubled, at odd moments, by a deeper sense of his situation. The old people who surround the body are first dismissed as “unreal,” but later he remarks, “J’ai eu un moment l’impression ridicule qu’ils étaient là pour me juger.” The same disturbed feeling is aroused by the old man who stares fixedly at him while he dozes, “comme s’il n’attendait que mon réveil.” The dreamlike starkness of the mortuary forces every detail into sharp relief and seems to charge the word “réveil” with more than literal meaning. The old people who are in attendance are awake in a significant sense because they are closer to death than is Meursault and feel it as a conditioning factor in their lives. This curious “wakewfulness” is what separates them from the ordinary world of “cafés” and “bavardage” which occupy the doorkeeper and Meursault and is perhaps the underlying reason why the doorkeeper recognizes no community with them (they are always spoken of as “ils,” “les autres,” or “les vieux”). Yet a glimmer of insight into the importance of death for a man’s life is afforded to Meursault as he appears to reflect on the wake: “J’avais même l’impression que cette morte, couchée au milieu d’eux, ne signifiait rien à leurs
yeux. Mais je crois maintenant que c'était une impression fausse" (p. 20). The "maintenant" of this passage introduces into the account a time later than the opening "aujourd'hui" and would appear to suggest a Meursault who is at the point of death himself in the final scenes of the novel. From such a perspective he would see with new eyes the implications of "cette morte" to the living watchers.

He obtains a further insight into the unblinkable reality of death and the absurd as he follows his mother's coffin in the merciless sun the following day. The glare which makes him dizzy seems to transform the landscape into something "inhumain et déprimant"; he feels the sun to be as brutal and inescapable as was the light in the mortuary. The nurse at the procession tells him, "Si on va doucement, on risque une insolence. Mais si on va trop vite, on est en transpiration et dans l'église on attrape un chaud et froid." Elle avait raison. Il n'y avait pas d'issue" (p. 29). The harsh sense of alienation from nature which Meursault's imagery conveys throughout the sun-drenched funeral procession, his perception of something "inhumain" in the landscape, invites attention to a passage in Le Mythe where Camus describes a stage in absurd awareness: "Un degré plus bas et voici l'étrangeté: s'apercevoir que le monde est 'épais,' entrevoir à quel point une pierre est étrangère, nous est irréductible, avec quelle intensité la nature, un paysage peut nous nier. Au fond de toute beauté, il y a quelque chose d'inhumain!" (p. 28, my italics).

Meursault has glimpsed the foreignness and inhumanity of a world which negates man's hopes and rationality. He has seen, fitfully, at moments of crisis, that one cannot elude such a world ("Il n'y avait pas d'issue"), but his perceptions have no consequences for him because they do not become the center of a conscious encounter with this world—the true role of the absurd hero. His general metaphysical condition in this first section may be likened to that of the Algerians in Camus's short piece, "Le Été à Alger" of whom the author writes: "[Ce peuple] a mis tous ses biens sur cette terre et reste dès lors sans défense contre la mort!" (Noces, p. 59).

It has been generally observed that Camus's recurring imagery of sea and sun is derived in part from his personal essays and novels. Yet it is worth noting that Camus's rapport with the deeply sensual world of the Algerians is always conditioned by the knowledge that their honesty in confronting realities is to a large extent unconscious, and that their potential for greatness is to a large extent unrealized. Awareness of one's condition is vital to the absurd wager and the true absurd hero; in this respect the Algerians remain a "peuple enfant." The Meursault we meet in part 1 of L'Étranger is a member of this unengaged and metaphysically unaware community of Algerians Camus had known as a boy. His life, like the lives Camus describes in Noces, is wholly cast in the present. Meursault in prison remarks of his earlier life: "J'étais toujours pris par ce qui allait arriver, par aujourd'hui ou par demain" (p. 143). His attitude toward death, also, has affinities with the Algerian attitude. Camus writes in Noces, "Tout ce qui touche à la mort est ici ridicule ou odieux," and a bit further on he adds, "Comment faire comprendre pourtant que ces images de la mort ne se séparent jamais de la vie?" (Noces, p. 57). In L'Étranger it is evident that images of death and life are not wholly separated in Meursault's mind at his mother's funeral; his tendency is to see death in terms of physical details which do not require an 

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*Many students of L'Étranger have made the assumption that Meursault is an absurd hero from the beginning of the novel. Sartre writes of Meursault: "Still his absurdity seems to have been given rather than achieved; that's how he is, and that's that. He does have his revelation on the last page, but he has always lived according to Camus's standards" (p. 114). Albert Maquet writes: "With Meursault, the absurd is like a congenital infirmity and this is what gives such weight of reality to this character. One might say that the absurd is in his blood. And he makes that absurd live, not by the vigilance of the mind but in the abandonment of the flesh." Albert Camus, *The Invincible Summer*. trans. Briffault (New York, 1958), p. 53. And Thomas Hanna follows suit with the remark that from the beginning Meursault "shows the absolute indifference of the absurd hero, but at the same time does not possess the absurd hero's consciousness of the absurdity of his life and the revolt against it." The Thought and Art of Albert Camus (Chicago, 1958), p. 39.*

A distinction that must be made, and that only Hanna of the above writers makes with any precision, is that between the absurd as a state of being and the absurd as a state of consciousness. The Algerians in Noces and Meursault in part 1 of L'Étranger are absurd objects to an outside mind (such as Camus's own when he returns as an adult to the scenes of his boyhood in Algeria), but they are not absurd subjects who are aware of their participation in an absurd world. The true absurd hero is the conscious hero: "The ideal of the absurd man," Camus writes in Le Mythe, "is the present and the succession of present moments before an ever conscious spirit." The confusion which Camus's parable appears to present in terms of his philosophy of the absurd is clarified when we see that Meursault partakes of both absurd objectivity and absurd subjectivity, and that his adventure is a progressive journey from one state to the other.*
order of thought distinct from his present routine.

The "Algerian" quality of Meursault's consciousness is maintained until the encounter with the Arab on the beach which ends the first section and begins the process of moulding him into an absurd protagonist. In this second confrontation of death, at which Meursault is no longer passive but active, the presence of sun and heat again show a certain verbal similarity with the language of awakening consciousness in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. *Le Mythe* is not strictly a philosophic work which employs a tightly restricted, logical vocabulary; rather it is written as an adventure of the mind, and the language used to describe this quest is often novelistic. Metaphors of climate and landscape are frequently used to convey mental states: "paysages spirituels" (p. 46); "ces lieux déserts et sans eaux où la pensée arrive à ses confins" (p. 22); "je veux savoir auparavant si la pensée peut vivre dans ces déserts" (p. 37); or the longer phrase: "On sent bien qu'il y a un climat commun aux esprits que l'on vient de rappeler. Dire que ce climat est meurtrier, c'est à peine jouer sur les mots. Vivre sous ce ciel étoffant commande qu'on en sorte ou qu'on y reste" (pp. 46-47). This emphasis on deserts without water and oppressive skies calls attention to Camus's characteristic way of conceiving which absurd awareness might begin.

Meursault was on such a ground of oppressive heat and light at his mother's funeral, and he encounters this metaphorical landscape of the mind again on the beach outside Algiers. As at the funeral procession, the sun beats down on him with an insistent, disruptive force: "C'était le même soleil que le jour où j'avais enterré maman et, comme alors, le front surtout me faisait mal et toutes ses veines battaient ensemble sous la peau" (p. 87). Once again Meursault attempts to elude the stark pressure of light and sun in the mortuary and at the funeral. The "Algerian" quality of Meursault's consciousness is maintained until the encounter with the Arab on the beach which ends the first section and begins the process of moulding him into an absurd protagonist. In this second confrontation of death, at which Meursault is no longer passive but active, the presence of sun and heat again show a certain verbal similarity with the language of awakening consciousness in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. *Le Mythe* is not strictly a philosophic work which employs a tightly restricted, logical vocabulary; rather it is written as an adventure of the mind, and the language used to describe this quest is often novelistic. Metaphors of climate and landscape are frequently used to convey mental states: "paysages spirituels" (p. 46); "ces lieux déserts et sans eaux où la pensée arrive à ses confins" (p. 22); "je veux savoir auparavant si la pensée peut vivre dans ces déserts" (p. 37); or the longer phrase: "On sent bien qu'il y a un climat commun aux esprits que l'on vient de rappeler. Dire que ce climat est meurtrier, c'est à peine jouer sur les mots. Vivre sous ce ciel étoffant commande qu'on en sorte ou qu'on y reste" (pp. 46-47). This emphasis on deserts without water and oppressive skies calls attention to Camus's characteristic way of conceiving which absurd awareness might begin.

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The Arab he encounters appears to lose human integrity and to be allied with the impersonal reality of the sun-swept beach in wielding a knife which probes Meursault's eyes with light. Carl Viggiani writes of this confrontation: "Camus's use of the sun as the symbol of the ultimate vision of truth in "L'Étranger" makes it probable that here too the sun, with its terrible brilliance, is what lights the central truth, that is, death." From a similar viewpoint, S. Beynon John finds the sun in the beach scene and at the funeral to be symbolic of "violence and destruction." This essay would suggest that these insights be taken a step further: it would appear that not only the sun, but (as the white glare of the mortuary suggests) "lumière" in general is employed by Camus in a recurrent pattern which in moments of crisis is highly symbolic. Furthermore, the metaphorical use of light in *Le Mythe* strongly suggests that the "violence" of this pattern is associated with what Camus conceives to be the mental shock of dawning absurd awareness, and that the association of this pattern with death is designed to dramatize the metaphysical ground of that awakening. Camus's recurring emphasis on a heat and glare that disturb Meursault's normal processes of thought, together with his repeated stress on "le front," the symbolic source of consciousness—these suggest that the pressure in the beach scene is toward a delirium which will destroy the mental poise Meursault has maintained by staying uninvolved. A sense of the world's potential for negation rises to meet him as it meets every man who takes thought.³

³ Viggiani, p. 882.

⁴ "Image and Symbol in the Work of Albert Camus," *French Studies*, IX (January 1955), 47. John goes on to note that Camus's symbolic use of the sun is a key to "the metaphysical intention that animates Camus's work. The entire novel is an allegory of that absurd universe which Camus has described elsewhere—*Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942)—in philosophical terms." Further, this critic feels that the sun in *L'Étranger* "absolves man from responsibility—and hence from guilt—by reducing him to something less than man, to the status of an irresponsible element in nature" (pp. 47-48). The present essay supports the idea that the sun's effect both at the funeral and on the beach is to make Meursault an instrument of an absurd universe, but would maintain that the real importance of this fate lies in its effect on Meursault's subjective awareness of his metaphysical condition. From this perspective, the sun "absolves" Meursault from guilt only technically and superficially; in terms of the parable it begins a realisation of his complicity in an absurd world.

⁵ The fated—almost predestined—quality of Meursault's rendezvous with the Arab is in keeping with the underlying archetypal movement in this novel from innocence to responsibility. The Arab encounter is a *rôle de passage* brought about by subtle maturation rather than deliberate decision, and the sun—as a traditional symbol of ripening time—is thus an appropriate aegis for part I (the novel's dominant
The suggestion that a symbolic waking to consciousness is at issue in this crucial beach scene is reinforced by the descriptive details of the actual shooting. Unsettled by the sun and not fully in control, Meursault shoots the Arab five times. In this moment he realizes that something basic and irrevocable has happened to his life: “La gâchette a cédé, j’ai touché le ventre poli de la crosse et c’est là, dans le bruit à la fois sec et assourdissant, que tout a commencé. J’ai secoué la sueur et le soleil. J’ai compris que j’avais détruit l’équilibre du jour, le silence exceptionnel d’une plage où j’avais été heureux” (p. 88). Meursault’s curious phrase, “détruit l’équilibre du jour,” and the implication that he has shattered the calm surface of a life in which he had been happy, invite attention to the following passage from Le Mythe de Sisyphe: “En réalité, je n’étais pas réellement dans l’unité de sa nostalgie. Mais à son premier mouvement, ce monde se fêle et s’écroule: une infinité d’éclats miroitants s’offrent à la connaissance. Il faut désespérer d’en reconstruire jamais la surface familière et tranquille qui nous donnerait la paix du cœur” (pp. 33–34). In view of the symbolic and metaphorical associations that exist between light and consciousness in Le Mythe, and the stress on the penetrating quality of light on the beach in L’Étranger, the shattering effect Meursault feels after the shooting may be fruitfully viewed as having a relation to the “premier mouvement” of his mind. This “premier mouvement” is the beginning of absurd awareness, which is described in Le Mythe as a mental fragmentation leading to a destruction of mental equilibrium—precisely the sensations that Meursault feels after killing the Arab.

In the light of these associations, his emphasis on this moment as a beginning is important. The expression “tout a commencé” is used directly after he shoots the Arab and is used again in prison to indicate a hopeless reality which must be faced: “En réalité, je n’étais pas réellement en prison les premiers jours. . . C’est seulement après la première et la seule visite de Marie que tout a commencé” (p. 103). Emphasis on absurd consciousness as a “beginning” also occurs in Le Mythe: “Un jour seulement, le ‘pourquoi’ s’élève et tout commence dans cette lassitude teintée d’étonnement. ‘Commence,’ ceci est important. La lassitude est à la fin des actes d’une vie machinale, mais elle inaugure en même temps le mouvement de la conscience. Elle l’éveille et elle provoque la suite” (p. 27, my italics).

Camus defines the “sentiment de l’absurdité” as “cet incalculable sentiment qui prive l’esprit du sommeil nécessaire à sa vie” (Mythe, p. 18). In prison Meursault is to hear an ice cream vendor and think: “Oui, c’était l’heure où il y avait bien longtemps, je me sentais content. Ce qui m’attendait alors, c’était toujours un sommeil léger et sans rêves” (p. 138). His shots on the beach have destroyed forever the possibility of easy, dreamless sleep. On the basis of associations which connect sleep and lassitude with a lack of mental perceptivity or with self-deception, it is suggested that Meursault’s encounter with the Arab marks the opening stage in a now conscious confrontation of irrationality and hostility.

Section II of L’Étranger dramatizes the slow transformation of a once insouciant, comfortable mind into the lucid, open-eyed, absurd hero who emerges in the final pages. This full transformation is brought about by the final crisis in Meursault’s symbolic journey: his third experience with the fact and idea of death which he has tried to hold from him without success. An awareness of death, which Camus finds in Le Mythe to give life meaning, begins at last to operate meaningfully on the protagonist of L’Étranger. He now begins to feel what the watchful old people in the mortuary felt while he dozed: the intensity imparted to life by one’s own imminent death.

During his first days in prison, Meursault hopes vaguely for something to happen (“J’attendsais vaguement quelque événement nouveau”), but gradually he realizes that hope is not justified: “j’ai senti que j’étais chez moi dans ma cellule et que ma vie s’y arrêtait” (p. 104).

imagery moves from the sunshine of Meursault’s carefree youth to the prison cell evening of his maturity. Meursault’s early disinterest in death and marriage suggest the child’s unwillingness to take up those burdens of participation that attempt to wrest meaning out of meaninglessness. The beach encounter is Meursault’s symbolic initiation into the adult world of understanding.

The striking metaphorical richness of the entire beach encounter, which contrasts to the straightforward prose that precedes and follows it, has been noted by several critics. John Cruickshank writes: “The point at which Meursault’s language becomes fanciful and metaphorical is also the point at which he wrongly interprets experience—as distinct from simply failing to understand it—and becomes a murderer” (p. 158). I suggest that the richness of the passage is more appropriately understood (I am unable to see what Meursault “wrongly interprets” in Cruickshank’s explanation) as a dramatization of Meursault’s mental agitation at a moment when he is symbolically experiencing the destruction of mental equilibrium that accompanies a consciousness of the absurd.
Camus observes in *Le Mythe* that the cessation of hope is a necessary preliminary to a full awareness of the absurd condition. "Eluder, voilà le jeu constant," he writes. "L'élision type, l'élision mortelle qui fait le troisième thème de cet essai, c'est l'espoir" (p. 21).

But it is only after Meursault has been convicted and sentenced to death that the true dialogue between the "silence déraisonnable du monde" and his need for meaning begins. One of the early signs of this encounter is his obsessive desire to find a loophole in the law's seemingly irresistible machinery. The desire to find "a way out" of the prison of finitude is one of the first mental steps that the truly aware man takes to reach the desert of the absurd position. "Ce qui m'intéresse en ce moment," Meursault remarks in his cell, "c'est d'échapper à la mécanique, de savoir si l'inévitable peut avoir une issue" (p. 152). The abstract quality of this statement (consider "d'échapper à la mécanique" and the substantive use of "inévitable," language which seems much too philosophical for the earlier Meursault to whom everything is "égal") begins to suggest the quality of thought in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Meursault's reasoning grows steadily more rigorous as he becomes conscious of his position: "Malgré ma bonne volonté, je ne pouvais pas accepter cette certitude insolente. Car enfin, il y avait une disproportion ridicule entre le jugement qui l'avait fondé et son déroulement imperturbable à partir du moment où ce jugement avait été prononcé" (p. 154).

In a passage from *Le Mythe* Camus characterizes the principle of the absurd with the example of a man charging a machine gun. The act is absurd, he writes, "en vertu de la disproportion qui existe entre son intention et la réalité qui l'attend, de la contradiction que je puis saisir entre ses forces réelles et le but qu'il se propose" (p. 47). The disproportion that Meursault perceives between the vague and irrational judgment of the court and the enormous gravity of that judgment's consequences, is precisely the sense of "disproportion" which Camus feels to be inherent in the human condition when properly faced. So too, behind Meursault's musings on death's "certitude insolente" is an echo of Camus's remarks on the inevitability of death in *Le Mythe*. "L'horreur vient en réalité du côté mathématique de l'événement," he writes. "Ce côté élémentaire et définitif de l'aventure fait le contenu du sentiment absurde" (p. 30).

The "sentiment absurde" is thus gradually achieved by Meursault's burgeoning awareness of how his coming death, faced as an inescapable negation of his life, brings him a new sense of self that he had never previously grasped. 8 His transformation into the absurd hero at the close of his symbolic journey is most clearly dramatized during his interview with the prison chaplain. Meursault's dialogue with this arch-eluder reveals a number of major characteristics of the absurd reasoner which are to be found in the following passage of *Le Mythe*: "On lui assure que c'est péché d'orgueil [to persist in absurdist reasoning], mais il n'entend pas la notion de péché; que peut-être l'enfer est au bout, mais il n'a pas assez d'imagination pour se représenter cet étrange avenir; qu'il perd la vie immortelle, mais cela lui paraît futile. On voudrait lui faire reconnaître sa culpabilité. Lui se sent innocent. A vrai dire, il ne sent que cela, son innocence irréparable. C'est elle qui lui permet tout. Ainsi ce qu'il exige de lui-même, c'est de vivre seulement avec ce qui ne soit certain. On lui répond que rien ne l'est. Mais ceci du moins est une certitude. C'est avec elle qu'il a affaire: il veut savoir s'il est possible de vivre sans appel" (pp. 75–76).

This passage clearly suggests the metaphysical grounds of Meursault's dissatisfaction with the chaplain. The phrase "il n'entend pas la notion de péché," for example, is well illustrated by Meursault's remark: "Selon lui [the chaplain], la justice des hommes n'était rien et la justice de Dieu tout. J'ai remarqué que c'était la première qui m'avait condamné. Il m'a répondu qu'elle n'avait pas, pour autant, lavé mon péché. Je lui ai dit que je ne savais pas ce qu'était un péché" (pp. 165–166, my italics).

Camus's phrase in *Le Mythe*, "On lui assure . . . qu'il perd la vie immortelle, mais cela lui paraît futile," is paralleled in *L'Étranger* by the following dialogue begun by the chaplain: "Non, je ne peux pas vous croire. Je suis sûr . . ."
qu'il vous est arrivé de souhaiter une autre vie.' Je lui ai répondu que naturellement, mais cela n'avait pas plus d'importance que de souhaiter d'être riche, de nager très vite ou d'avoir une bouche mieux faite. C'était du même ordre" (pp. 167-168).

The interview with the chaplain is brought to a violent close by Meursault's lucid rage against the falseness of hope and comfortable thinking: "Je me suis mis à crier à plein goiser et je l'ai insulté et je lui ai dit de ne pas prier, et qu'il valait mieux brûler que disparaître. . . . Il avait l'air si certain, n'est-ce pas? Pourtant, aucune de ses certitudes ne valait un cheveu de femme. Il n'était même pas sûr d'être en vie puisqu'il vivait comme un mort. Moi, j'avais l'air d'avoir les mains vides. Mais j'étais sûr de moi, sûr de tout, plus sûr que lui, sûr de ma vie et de cette mort qui allait venir" (pp. 168-169). This argument clearly reveals an aroused Meursault who, in the face of his own death, is brought to a realization of truths which he had only dimly perceived earlier. He has been metamorphosed into an absent reasoner who maintains his sovereignty of self-knowledge despite the solicitations of conventional escapes from the self. Having started as a shrinking from consciousness in section I, Meursault now has an awareness only slightly less rigorous in expression than the mentality exhibited in Le Mythe de Sisyphe—he has taken up the wager of the absurd.

Meursault has strong affinities with Camus's conception of Sisypheus in the closing description of him in his prison cell. Camus says of Sisyphus at the base of his mountain: "Chacun des grains de cette pierre, chaque éclat minéral de cette montagne pleine de nuit, à lui seule, forme un monde. La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux" (p. 168). So too, Meursault in his cell awaiting death feels the sounds and smells of the countryside to form 'un monde' as they become intensified in memory by his predicament. He thinks back again to his mother and now understands why she too chose to struggle in the face of death's negation and took a "fiancé." Finally he thinks: "Et moi aussi, je me suis senti prêt à tout revivre. Comme si cette grande colère m'avait purgé du mal, vidé d'espoir, devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d'étoiles, je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde. De l'éprouver si pareil à moi, si fraternel enfin, j'ai senti que j'avais été heureux, et que je l'étais encore" (pp. 171-172, my italics).

A sense of the world's fraternal indifference has at last brought Meursault to a realization that he is, in fact, "coupable" as he vaguely felt himself to be in the early courtroom scenes. But from this perspective he sees that he is guilty not of simply breaking the laws of men, but guilty of the broader offense in which all men to some degree participate: he has become a part of an absurd universe. It is this universe which drove him to the violence against the unoffending Arab on the beach and it was the shooting which revealed to him his inescapable complicity in a world which negates human life.

This insight, it would seem, is Meursault's final step in his journey to consciousness; it is a step wherein he transcends his own ego and becomes one with that knowledge which has moved beneath his indifference throughout the early scenes of the novel. Abjuring the soft promises of the chaplain, who would give him hope in exchange for an integrity of conscious suffering ("il valait mieux brûler que disparaître"), Meursault chooses execration. "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" (p. 172). This strange desire for "cres de haine" is linked philosophically to his mother's desire to take a "fiancé" in old age; both ideas appear absurd and futile, yet Meursault sees that the very friction of one's resistance to death asserts an inalienable core of identity. From an attempt to elude the implications of his fate at the hands of an irrational community, Meursault has, at the last, chosen to define himself by that fate. He has become like Sisyphus in the final chapters of Le Mythe: a being execrated by the gods yet one who knows himself fully only when face to face with the objects of that hatred—the solidity of his rock and the steepness of his mountain. Meursault has also become vaguely associated with Christ in this imagined scene of reviled execution. But the suggestion of Christ's...
crucifixion in Meursault's hoped for "consummation" is clearly an identification with Christ the sufferer not Christ the redeemer. Only on a cross of hatred can Meursault completely fulfill himself.

Meursault's slow coming to knowledge has at last ended with the paradox which *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* propounded more philosophically: Man, as part of an absurd existence, is least alienated from the sensation of being when he is most sensitive to that inhuman hostility that lurks beneath the mask of habit. To strip the mask is to feel to the last agony that grandeur in loneliness of Christ and Sisyphus.

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