

A SEMIOTIC READING
OF
ALBERT CAMUS' L'ÉTRANGER

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
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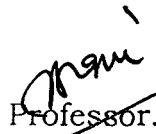
CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled A Semiotic Reading of Albert Camus' L' Étranger submitted by Meenakshi Bhattacharya in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy of this University, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University. This is an original work.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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A NOTE

Quotations from The Outsider (which appear in Chapters II & IV) are from the Stuart Gilbert translation which was published in 1961 by Penguin Books and subsequently reprinted. Page references, indicated in parentheses are to the 1961 reprint. Only one reference is to the original text of L'Étranger, published by Gallimard in 1942.

All the quotations from The Plague (in chapter III) are from the Stuart Gillbert translation published in 1948 by Alfred A. Knopf. Page references are to the Modern Library edition published by Random House.

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Introduction

This study attempts to understand the protagonist's experience (Meursault, in L'Étranger) precisely as it is lived. By paying heed to the reality of his own experiential viewpoint, I have examined the actual meanings situations have for him. This has helped me to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of his nature.

Even the most seemingly isolated physiological events have been understood in relation to Meursault's total existence. For example, Meursault drops off to sleep on his way to Marengo; as if that wasn't enough, within a space of a few hours he sleeps again during the vigil beside his mother's coffin. This was the silent way the human body chose to escape the sorrow caused by the death of a loved one.

Rather than preconceiving Meursault's conduct from an outside point of view, this study clarifies its significance by understanding his own viewpoint. His apparently strange behaviour at the Home (drinking café au lait and smoking cigarettes in the dead body's presence), for instance, is likely to be misunderstood as callousness, as it is indeed done so by the authorities of the Home and the prosecuting attorney. Seen in the context of his experience however, its meaning lies in the relief he felt at the passing away of Death. It's quite another thing that

Death never did pass away, can never pass away, as the novel itself testifies.

Another thing that the analysis does is to point out the growth of Meursault's personality. It also emphasises, in addition, the continuance of this process that does not cease until death.

To me, L'Étranger was and still remains an interesting novel. But what made it fascinating was the excavation of its meaning. Here's wishing that the same excitement is partaken by those who read the analysis.

Happy reading!

CHAPTER II

And God said, Let there be light;
And there was light. And God saw the light,
that it was good: and God divided the light
from the darkness. And God called the light
Day, and the darkness he called Night.
And there was evening and there was morning,
one day.

The Holy Bible, Genesis i, 3-5

Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

William Shakespeare

Macbeth, Act V, Sc. 5.

Unveiling the stranger

PART - I

I

The time of the day is morning.

“Mother died today. Or may be yesterday”[13].

The novel opens with the death of Meursault’s mother, her seemingly ultimate withdrawal after she is sent to the Home for Aged Persons by her son. It is “through the son’s nostalgia”¹ that she attains a “symbolic value.”² What can a mother symbolise, except death, for hers is a tie that binds.

When Meursault received the telegram informing him of his mother’s demise, he betrayed an unusual hurry to get away to Marengo and come back soon; once at the Home, he asked to be allowed to see Mother “at once”[14] -- on second thoughts he decided not to; failed to “imagine”[24] why they had waited so long for the funeral procession to get “under way”[24] and found it “interesting”[18] to know that because of the intense heat in those parts, dead bodies were buried “mighty quickly”[17]. In other words, he appreciated the efficiency with which the dead were disposed of.

The Warden spoke of the “little”[15] mortuary; standing at its entrance, Meursault noted that it was a “small, low building”[15]. Neither could he

help but observe the fact that the funeral procession was a "little"[25] one. So, this was the way they "demoted" death "from the sacred status normally attributed to it"³4.

The son declined to see the dead body of his mother. He refused instinctively, to being alone its presence. He avoided having even "a last glimpse"[22] of his mother when the undertaker's men arrived to turn down the screws of the coffin. That is precisely the reason why the event never became real, for him.

Meursault loves to sleep. He slept in the bus, on his way to Marengo; dozed off during the "vigil"[21] and imagined himself "going straight to bed and sleeping twelve hours at a stretch." [27]. Is it because sleep is closely akin to death, in bringing oblivion? Why would he want the bliss of ignorance, unless it be to escape from sorrow?

What an *eye* for extraordinary minuteness of detail does Meursault have! He noted, for instance, that the Warden of the Home had a Legion of Honour rosette in his buttonhole; that the lid of his mother's coffin "was in place but the screws had been given only a few turns"[16]; noticed too, that the Arab nurse sitting beside the bier had a bandage round her head which "lay quite flat across the bridge of her nose"[17] (a prefiguration of violence?); and what's more, observed "each curve or angle"[19] of every object kept in the mortuary. Not a "detail of the old people's clothes or features escaped"[19] his attention. Even the

most insignificant detail caught his attention – whether it be Thomas’ “slight limp”[25] or his “scarlet ears framed in wisps of silky white hair”[24] or the Warden who walked to the church with “carefully measured steps, economizing every gesture”[25]; or even the “bits of white roots mixed up with the red earth”[27] that were being thrown on his mother’s coffin.

He *heard* the old men “sucking at the insides of their cheeks”[20] while they sat during the long vigil; he listened to the sound of saliva being spitted into “a big check handkerchief”[21] and gave an eager ear to the “chattering”[15] of the old men whose voices “reminded”[15] him of “parakeets in a cage”[15].

“And then there were the *smells*,* of hot leather and horse-dung from the hearse, veined with whiffs of incense smoke.”[26].

What makes Meursault see, hear and smell so keenly? Does his receptiveness to sounds, smells and sights spring from the fact that he is waiting? What is he waiting for, unless it be death?

He speaks “as little as possible”⁵ Meursault did not exchange a word with any of the old people who sat up with him during the vigil beside his mother’s coffin, and in the course of conversations between him and the Warden or the door-porter, it were they who chatted most of the time, while he broke off soon, neither replying nor paying “much”[19]

* My italics.

attention to what they said. His responses to their queries were either in monosyllables or in short, cryptic sentences. It's likely that Meursault's brevity stems from his weariness. If that is so, what is he weary of?

Meursault is averse to being watched. He complained to the Warden of the Home about his mother who always watched him; had an uncomfortable sensation when the door-porter was posted at his back; and says that it had a "queer"[19] effect, when he found all those old people "solemnly eyeing"[20] him. For an instance, he had an "absurd impression that they had come to sit in judgement"[20] over him.

During the vigil beside his mother's coffin, Meursault woke up in the middle of night to discover one old man (the rest were sleeping) "staring hard"[21] at him, "as if"[21] he had been expecting the former "to wake up"[21]. But the watched went off to sleep again. For in the morning of his life, Meursault had not yet chosen an audience for himself. The very fact that he could not see the old men's eyes when he looked at their faces (he sees only a "dull glow"[19]), lends credit to this observation.

During the night long vigil, one of the old women started weeping. She "emitted a little choking sob"[20] regularly and Meursault had a feeling that she would never stop crying. Subsequently, he came to know that the woman had been "devoted"[20] to his mother and it was

now that she found herself "all alone"[20]. Clearly, the old woman nursed the illusion that there is "solidarity in the struggle"⁶.

While talking to the door-porter, Meursault points out to him that "he was really an inmate like the others"[18]. But the door-porter would not hear of this. He was " ' an official like ' " [18]. The porter's habit of saying " 'they' "[18] or " 'them old folks' "[18], while talking about the inmates of the Home, strikes a chord in Meursault; what impressed him was the porter's efforts to acquire a certain indifference towards these old inmates of the Home by externalizing them. Look how Meursault tries to objectify and also emphasize the distinctness of his love by calling it "Mother"[13] (she was much unlike him); it is only once, during the conversation between the Warden and himself, that he refers to her as "my mother"[15], who like him, had never given a thought to religion all her life.

And now the funeral. When he set out for the church, "the sky was already a blaze of light"[24] and Meursault could feel the "first ^{WAVES} of heat"[24] licking his back. "In the full glare of the morning sun"[24], the landscape seemed "inhuman, discouraging"[25] because it drove him to despair, mocking at his nothingness. Shortly, the sky came to be so "dazzling"[25] that Meursault "dared not"[25] raise his eyes. What does that denote? That the powerful light laid bare to him the meaninglessness of his existence which he dared not acknowledge. With

the light came its intense heat; with the exposure, a potent agitation. In fact, the combined effect of the heat and light is so oppressive that Meursault felt his "eyes and thoughts growing blurred"[26] But he walked on, for he had yet a long way to go to reach his goal. Sometimes in silence and sometimes in agitation, Meursault struggled against the absurdity of life that threatened to get the better of him.

2

Confronted with despair, Meursault reacted by plunging neck-deep into pleasure. Thinking about how best to spend his Saturday morning, he decided in favour of a swim in the pool. But, hadn't he been, "really exhausted by the previous day's experiences"[27]?

Oh, for a life of physical exhilaration and sensual indulgences! Be it treading water or keeping his head on Marie's lap and feeling her stomach heaving and falling beneath his head, or putting his arms round her waist and swimming beside her, Meursault was completely in his element. Significantly enough, Meursault showed a reluctance to let go of this "chance for life"⁷ and he took the initiative of asking Marie out that particular evening. That same night, after watching a comic film, he went to bed with her. It was Saturday, the day after his mother's funeral.

While drying themselves at the edge of the pool, Marie remarked casually to Meursault, "I'm browner than you"[28]. Suggestively, an exceeding shade of brown has a darker shade of black.

Meursault could not "help feeling a bit guilty"[28] about his mother's death. In fact, he was about to justify himself to Marie when she noticed that he was in mourning, but stopped short of it for fear of sounding foolish. Evidently, Meursault felt an immediate need to justify himself. What is worth pondering about here is whether this need for a justification stemmed from a bad deed or a good one.

Sundays put him off; he had "never cared"[29] for weekends. For one thing, there was nothing to be done. And since, when one awaits someone or something, one remains inactive for that period of time, Meursault too did nothing. He stayed in bed till noon, fried some eggs, and ate them without bread because he "couldn't be bothered going down to buy it"[29]. Only when it was unavoidable did Meursault stir himself; he went down to buy bread and spaghetti in order to cook his dinner.

Above all, it was essential to kill time. So he picked up an old newspaper, read it, cut out an advertisement and pasted it into an album; then he went out on to the balcony and watched people go by.

What is striking in Meursault's observations about married couples is the image of the ponderous wife and the skinny husband. In this particular instance, the family that he saw was going for their Sunday afternoon walk. Meursault noted that while the father was a "little man"[30], the mother was "an enormously fat woman"[30]. At the Home for Aged Persons in Marengo, similar proportions had been made a note of; the old men whom Meursault had seen were "thin as rakes"[19], while the old women had big "paunches"[19]. This image is expressive of a husband who is vulnerable to being devoured; the size of the wife suggests a huge appetite.

The few people who were about were passing by in an "absurd hurry"[30]. The noise and the laughter reflected a world of anticipations and disappointments that sustained itself beneath an indifferent sky. As darkness carried away this vain agitation, a cat, "the first of the evening"[32], crossed the street "unhurrying"[32]. Doubtless, the cat had brains.

At the end of the day, Meursault was relieved to know that another Sunday had been fought and "somehow got through"[32]. To live the absurd is an "unceasing struggle"⁸ and this struggle had just been emptied of a day. But what is the absurd? It's the same thing going on and on without any ultimate meaning to it. As for the immediate meaning, of course, there is one.

The next day was a Monday. Meursault had expected to find his employer in a foul mood for he had taken four days off, but to his surprise, the employer evinced a keen interest in him. He asked Meursault if he wasn't "too tired"[33] and followed it up by enquiring how old his mother was. Meursault thought before replying, still he could only manage to give a figure that verged on the approximate. Earlier, a similar question posed by one of the undertaker's men had evoked a more uncertain response; Meursault could only reply then that his mother was "getting on"[25]. It is plain that the son had ceased to think of his mother. But this was to be expected since he "seldom"[15] went to see her after putting her away at the Home. Even on Sundays, when he felt at a loss that comes of doing nothing, he found enough reasons not to make the journey to Marengo. What is not so evident is why the son so assiduously cultivated this apathy towards his mother. On another level, *was it the slow cultivation of a detachment from death?*

Then there was old Salamano, who lived on the same floor as Meursault. Salamano and his dog shared a curious relationship. Although the dog and its master had been exclusive companions for eight years, and had come to "resemble"[34] each other, yet there was no love lost between them. Salamano always seemed to find fault with whatever

the dog did and the proverbial whip was therefore never spared. The commonly held view was that the master was a brute to persecute his dog thus. Nevertheless, there was one person who sympathised with the old man. And that was Meursault. He understood because he had a feeling heart... Old Salamano's predicament was yet human. Bereft of a future, undernourished by the present and saddled with a past which offered no solace, the old man came to develop an irascible nature, and this hurled itself at his only certainty in life, his dog.

In fact, the relationship with his dog was only an externalisation of Salamano's frustrated love for himself.

The first day of the week saw Meursault getting involved in Raymond's affairs. Raymond kept a girl with whom he regularly slept, until the day he discovered that he was being betrayed. The sordid affair ended up by Raymond confronting her with the truth and beating her "till the blood came"[38]. Not only that, he also left her brother "bleeding like a pig"[36] when the latter had egged him on. Still, he didn't think that he had his fill of revenge. What he had in mind therefore, was to write her a letter, one that was " 'a real stinker' "[39], and when she came back, he would go to bed with her, seizing this chance of humiliating her. Raymond wanted Meursault to write the letter for him. When the latter made ready to do so, Raymond told him the girl's name (not divulged to the reader). The girl was a Moor.

Meursault found the story "interesting"[39]. It is "interesting" that he should approve of the violent way in which the girl's brother was done with, by Raymond. He "understood"[39] too, why Raymond wanted the girl to "suffer"[39]. Consequently, he wrote the letter that was needed. Raymond was, to say the least, "delighted"[40] with the result, and very soon was calling Meursault a "brainy sort"[40] and an "old boy"[40]. The latter phrase gained in force when the former insisted that they were "pals"[40] from then on. To Meursault however, it didn't make a difference either way, for he wasn't subservient to friendship. Nonetheless, he accepted it enough to lend a helping hand to Raymond in a trying hour. Indifference is not denial.

Meursault says he "appreciated"[41] Raymond telling him that his mother was "bound"[41] to die someday or the other, and that one mustn't let such things overwhelm one. Yes, it is imperative to get over with the dead in order to live. And yet, Meursault did not love life...

When Meursault came out of Raymond's room, he did not rush to his own but "lingered for some moments on the landing"[41]. "The whole building was as quiet as the grave"[40] - did it take on this aspect because a virtual murder had just been committed? The very thought of it made him excited/ agitated? The life that rose from the

throes of death was the “little plaintive sound”[40] of a “moan”[40]: a notice of things to come?

4

The week passed by quite uneventfully till Saturday. Marie came to meet Meursault, and together they went to a beach that was some distance away from Algiers. These weekends spent in the company of Marie provided him with the opportunity of temporarily getting rid of the claustrophobic life he led. What was it that made Meursault have this sensation of being hemmed in from all sides? Well, it was his work that offered him hardly any respite; more immediately, it was the knowledge that life had no meaning worth living for. Thank God there lay liberation in forgetfulness – in sleep and in death.

As Marie was free on Sunday morning, Meursault asked her to have lunch with him. When he was coming up the stairs after buying some meat, he heard Salamano cursing his dog as usual. Meursault told Marie about the old man’s “habits”[42] and she laughed. After a while, she asked him if he “loved”[42] her. Meursault replied honestly that he did not; in fact, to him, “that sort of question had no meaning, really”[42]. Was it because love itself had little or no meaning? What divests love of its meaning is surely the fact that it is “the most human of all feelings.”⁹

This man did not hate Desire, he did not love it either. Meursault was *plain indifferent** to Desire, although it was this that had made him attentive to life.

It was around this moment, when Meursault was with Marie, that the "row"[43] began in Raymond's room. Bewildered by the loud, shrill noises, Meursault and Marie came out of their room to see what the matter was. A crowd had gathered on the landing, obviously drawn by a girl's screams. Raymond was still hitting her. Marie expressed her horror of what was going on to Meursault who said *nothing*. Neither did he go to fetch a policeman when she asked him to do so. Eventually, one did turn up though. What's more, he watched the scene *without* intervening even once to save the girl from Raymond's blows. Why? That's because he had committed himself to Raymond. Did it befit a *man* to dishonour his commitment? Wasn't it true that the girl was carrying on with other men, on the sly? Nevertheless, the yardstick of traditional morality would find Meursault's action wanting. Only, left to choose between morality and sincerity, our hero opted for the latter. And who can declare which of the two rates higher on a scale of values?

Is there a scale of values?

There was another reason, one that went deeper than the first.

* To grasp what is meant by indifference, picture Meursault and Desire on two opposite sides of a balance. It is only when the bar is poised at a straight angle that a state of indifference is reached. Notice, that Meursault can't do without Desire, for in that case, he would go down completely!

On all accounts, the Raymond affair had a seemingly fulfilling end. Raymond was “pleased”[45] at “having paid out his mistress so satisfactorily”[45], and as far as the police was concerned, he wasn’t afraid for he “knew exactly how to handle them”[44]. There remained just one last hitch; a “witness”[45] was needed. Meursault didn’t disapprove of giving evidence in favour of Raymond.

Apparently fed up of the frequent beatings he was lavished with, Salamano’s dog decided to make good his escape. Alternating between rage and despair at ceasing to possess the one thing that had been his link with life, the old man poured out his woes to Meursault. The sole antidote that the latter could offer was that stray dogs were kept in the pound for three days, while the police waited for their owners to claim them; it was after that, that they were disposed of. Evidently, this consolation wasn’t enough, for moments within giving it, Meursault heard a “wheezing sound”[46] coming from Salamano’s room, and he could guess that the old man was “weeping”[46] in the privacy of his parlour. Just then, for “some reason”[46], he couldn’t make out what, he “began thinking of Mother”[46]. Did the prospect of death strike Meursault as the old man’s only relief and did that make him hurry off to find his own in sleep?

The next week began on a rather ominous note when Raymond called up Meursault at his office to say that he had been "shadowed"[47] throughout the morning by some Arabs; one of them was the brother of the girl he had punished. The message ended with a request for Meursault to be on the lookout for the same. The receiver of this information "promised"[47] to do the needful.

Meursault's indifference to a successful career rubs his employer the wrong way. The employer was only too vexed to know that Meursault did not "care much one way or the other"[48] about a possible promotion and job transfer to Paris. But the latter saw no reason for "changing"[48] his life; in any case, he didn't think that one ever "changed one's real life"[48]. Unquestionably, the absurd pursued one everywhere. Still, as a student, he did have ambitions of making it big someday. It was only when he had to quit his studies that Meursault came to realise the temporal character of all things that usually give a significance to life. Yet, it was still arguable whether death was indeed the villain of the piece; for, didn't it deliver one from the absurd? Hence, Meursault waited for death. The only qualifying factor being...

Society and religion meant nothing to the man to whom the absurd had been revealed. For Meursault knew them for what they were – futile instruments worked by man to give a semblance of order to an

otherwise disordered universe. This explains why marriage had “no importance, really”[48] for Meursault; however, this did not prevent him from telling Marie that he would marry her “right away”[48] if she so desired. Isn’t this what goes by the name of sincerity? Recognising other people’s right to happiness: people you don’t love.

Meursault much admired the “little robot”[50] woman he met at Céleste’s restaurant. The woman merited such a name on account of her queer, mechanical gestures: the “jerky way”[50] in which she moved herself, the “meticulous attention”[50] with which she ticked off the items listed in the radio magazine (all the while studying them minutely), and the amazing manner of her walk. Never once did she turn to look back while walking and Meursault was surprised to find her covering the ground quickly, for she was after all a tiny creature. Finally, the “pace”[50] proved to be “too much”[50] for him, and he gave up *following* her.

Was Meursault attracted by the indifference of this human apparatus that worked so mechanically? Did his feeling heart make it difficult for him to keep pace with her? Does that amount to saying that emotions serve as a block to progress? Of course they do, for their vice-like grip leaves one impotent to carry on the struggle. Should then one hang them by the noose? Not necessarily, only there is nothing wrong in healing

people's wounds with a "saving indifference."¹⁰ Undoubtedly, one serves not only others but also oneself better that way.

Old Salamano's affection for his lost dog comes out in the open when he tells Meursault that although he and his dog had "some proper set-tos"[51] quite frequently, yet he was not without love for him. Unburdening himself to an understanding listener, the old man remembered a time when his dog had caught a skin disease and he would rub an ointment in its skin every night before going off to sleep. Notwithstanding that, the dog never got well, for its real problem was "old age"[52] and there was "no curing it"[52]. *This was his own ailment, the remedy of which baffled him.* The confidant expressed his sympathies at the old man's loss, only to be reminded that he must be feeling his own "terribly"[52]. When there was no reply, old Salamano added "rather"[52] embarrassingly that he "knew better"[52] than to believe in the "nasty"[52] reputation Meursault had in the street (hadn't he sent his mother to a Home?); for his part, he was certain that the son had "always"[52] been "devoted"[52] to his mother. Meursault could not but be "surprised"[52] to know the story of his ill repute. Wasn't this because of his belief that he had acted in all fairness to his mother? The decision to send his mother away was a product of the truthful realisation that she would be happier *away* from him. This was the very reason why the son tried to inculcate a certain indifference towards his mother, subsequent

to her withdrawal. The key point here is, that in putting away his mother, Meursault was *actually* attempting to thrust aside the power that death held over him. But, didn't he discover life to be absurd? Certainly so, only, there was youth and as long as there was youth, there was desire.

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It is noon.

Come Sunday morning and it was time to join Marie and Raymond on a trip to the beach that was just outside Algiers. This was part of an invitation extended by Masson, Raymond's friend, who owned a seaside bungalow at the close end of the beach.

On Saturday evening at the police station, Meursault had testified to the fact of the girl having betrayed Raymond. Meursault again took his place on the side of the assaulter.



That very day, the brother of the girl (he doesn't have a name!) stationed himself at the tobacconist's and kept an eagle eye on Raymond as he made his way to the bus stop along with Marie and Meursault. It seemed however, that the danger had passed, for half way along the bus-stop, when Raymond looked back, he found the Arab at the same place, staring "in a vague way"[54] at the spot they had just left.

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Once inside the bus, every worry was forgotten. Raymond cracked jokes to make Marie laugh and Meursault could see that he had an eye for her. What's surprising is the fact that he had called Meursault his pal. Did that make Raymond a not so worthy man?

Masson and his wife presented themselves as the ideal couple, very much in love with each other. The former told Meursault that he made it a point to spend his weekends and holidays at his seaside bungalow with his *wife*, "needless to say"[55]. The uprightness of this man must have stung Meursault, for when he heard this, he felt so moral that probably, "for the first time"[55], he "seriously considered the possibility"[55] of marrying Marie.

The present moment was made the most of when Meursault found himself with Marie, the living symbol of his desire. Both seized such opportunities to abandon themselves to their passion, deriving the keenest enjoyment from it. The sun and the sea were attuned to Meursault's enthusiasm and he revelled in this experience of being alive. Not for long, however.

It was during Meursault's second visit to the beach that the fight between Raymond and the Arab took place. Raymond was left with

gashes on his mouth and arm while the Arab sustained injuries on his face. *Vehemence again, and much like before, its butt is an Arab.* Clearly, the prevailing mood was one of violence and revenge. The sun only added to this violence by crushing everyone beneath its weight of intense heat; on Meursault especially the effect was pronounced, since he had a “bare head”[58]. Still, there was a saving factor: the head could go off to sleep. “All that sunlight beating down”[58] upon him made him feel “half asleep”[58].

It was not only the sun that was a source of aggravation to Meursault; the “glowing red”[59] sand too annexed his lighter temper with its fiery heat. The provocatory effect of the sea and sand was very powerful; yet, this time too, fortunately for Meursault, there arrived a depressant. This is the music of the “tinkle of the stream”[61] and “those three little lonely sounds”[61] that the other Arab extracted from the little reed he blew into. And although Meursault shared some tense moments (the Arabs watched Raymond’s and Meursault’s “movements”[61] while each waited for the other to make the first move) with the soothing effect (the other Arab went on playing the reed), yet the better half so captivated him that he felt as if the entire world had come to a halt on that “little strip of sand between the sunlight and the sea, the twofold silence of the reed and stream.”[62] Thus, Meursault came back to the

bungalow without having fired at the Arab (all this while he had waited to shoot the latter).

This is Meursault's third visit to beach.

Meursault returned to the beach once again. Wherever he saw, "there was the same red glare"[62], and as he made his way towards the end of the beach, he could feel the sunlight pressing upon him, trying to hinder his "progress"[62]. How did Meursault react this time to the uncovering of the nakedness of the absurd? Well, despite the agitation that followed as a natural consequence, our hero moved on; he "wasn't going to be beaten"[62] in his struggle against death. In fact, his resolve not to be outdone grew stronger as his despair became more formidable: "each time I felt a hot blast strike my forehead, I gritted my teeth, I clenched my fists in my trouser pockets and keyed up every nerve to fend off the sun and the dark befuddlement it was pouring into me"[62]. "Longing to hear again the tinkle of running water"[62] that would neutralise the effect of the "glare"[62], Meursault proceeded to "retrieve"[63] the tranquility he had lost - "the pool of shadow by the rock and its cool silence"[63].

But he was in for an unpleasant surprise. Raymond's Arab had come back. Meursault was "rather taken aback"[63]; his "impression"[63] was that the "incident"[63] had been brought to its conclusive end, and he "hadn't given a thought to it"[63] on his way there.

When the Arab saw Meursault, he “raised himself a little”[63] and put his hand in his pocket. “Naturally”[63], this led the latter to clasp Raymond’s revolver that was there in his coat pocket. After a while, the Arab sank back into the sand, his hand still at the same place. All this time, Meursault was keenly aware of the merciless light “pounding fiercely as ever on the long stretch of sand that ended at the rock”[63], and the heat pouring from the sky, itself a “sea of molten steel”[63].

It “struck”[63] him meanwhile, that the most appropriate course of action would be “to turn, walk away and think no more about it”[63]. This was the surest way of breaking the spell – to become indifferent to the distressing fact that lay in full view. But any escape was impossible, for the “whole beach pulsing with heat”[63] pressed on his back. Peace lay ahead and Meursault moved some distance in the direction of the stream. The Arab as yet made no movement. Because of the shadow that fell on his face, it “seemed”[63] to Meursault that the man was “grinning”[63] at him. “Perhaps”[63] he was making fun of Meursault’s pathetic condition!

Meursault stood still and “waited”[63]. Why? Presumably because he could not make up his mind about the step to be taken next.

During the time when Meursault waited, the heat began to grow *worse*. “It was just the same sort of heat”[63] as he had experienced at his mother’s funeral (it invaded his senses like before), and he had the “same disagreeable sensations”[64] in his “forehead”[64]-that of a powerful

despair which was unnerving him. Unable to “stand it any longer”[64], Meursault took that “one step forward”[64] in a desperate attempt to “get out of the sun”[64]. Obviously, that was a “fool”[64] action, for “moving on a yard or so”[64] wouldn’t help him get rid of it.

The moment Meursault put his foot forward, the Arab took out his knife and “held it up”[64] towards him. The blade shone in the sun and a sudden blaze of light burst from it. Meursault felt as if this brilliance “transfixed his forehead”[64] – one is reminded of the Revelation that left its spectators motionless in profound awe/terror! Along with this sensation of impotence, an impression of oblivion crept in: Meursault lost contact with the outside world; for him, there existed only “the cymbals of the sun”[64] striking his skull (could his agitation be more worse?), and “the keen blade of light”[64] that flashed up from the knife. Meursault was in the presence of *god* himself.

At the same moment, the sky broke in two and “a great sheet of flame”[64] (the heat is at its most intense in the presence of the power of the *divine*) flowing out in abundance finally took complete possession of him. At this climactic point, despair gave way to a bloody expression – “the trigger gave”[64] and Meursault shot the Arab. In spite of knowing that he had “shattered the balance of the day”[64], he emptied four more bullets into the “inert body”[64]. Was it a symbolic emptying of the fire that raged within him? In any case, “each successive shot was another

loud, fateful rap on the door"[64] of his "undoing"[64]. Having denied God, he was refused the grant of transcendence that believers enjoy.

The high drama took place at noon. Still, Meursault didn't allow himself to be "beaten"[62]; proving, in the process, that he was a man, that he would live and fight for what was not yet his?

Part – II

1

Evening has fallen.

A series of “formal examinations”[67] succeeded Meursault’s arrest. At the second of these, he was asked whether he had engaged a lawyer to “defend”[67] himself. Meursault replied in the negative; the reason given was that he believed his case to be “very simple”[67]. Nevertheless, the magistrate said, it would be seen to that the accused was provided with one. That “struck”[67] Meursault as “an excellent arrangement”[67], a move that would ensure a fair play between two opposing teams.

Murder being an exclusive experience, had obviously isolated Meursault, for when leaving the room of the examining magistrate, he went very close to extending his hand towards the latter as a mark of friendship; “just in time”[68] he recalled that he had “killed a man”[68].

The next day, a lawyer came to call on Meursault. After the initial introduction, he went on to say that he had gone through the record of the case carefully and had no doubt that his client would be let

off, provided his advice was complied with. Coming immediately to the one vital point that disturbed him, the lawyer enquired whether Meursault had felt “grief”[68] on the “ ‘sad occasion’ ”[68] of his mother’s death. If police reports were to be believed, the son had displayed “ ‘great callousness’ ”[68] at his mother’s funeral.

By way of an explanation Meursault answered, that of late he had begun to disentangle himself from his feelings. This act was consistent with his belief that true happiness lay only in a certain detachment. Bringing this into effect, Meursault steadily became indifferent towards almost everything in life: friendship, his work, success, women. There remained only his mother (a symbol of death) whom he loved. And it was precisely because he loved her (“I could truthfully say I’d been quite fond of Mother”[69]), that he so attentively pursued a process of being indifferent towards her. After all, that was the only way in which both the mother and son could release themselves from a bond that had ended up serving the misery of existence. Of course, there was death and that was a permanent release. Small wonder then, that “all normal people.... had more or less desired the death of those they loved”[69]. Death worked in two ways. It fixed love (while it was still love!) by “transforming it into destiny”¹¹; to a love that had decayed, it fetched the much needed relief as it eventually did to the mother-son relationship. Is that why Meursault says that he couldn’t help but feel “guilty”[28] about things like this?

Yet, despite everything, half the time, he hadn’t wanted his mother to die.

Clearly, this man waited for death (didn't he love his mother?), while trying not to be concerned with it.

Meursault was asked subsequently, if he had exercised a restraint on his "feelings"[69]. "No .. that wouldn't be true"[69], came the reply. For, far from keeping his emotions "under control"[69], Meursault had impulsively laid down his defences on that fateful day, to allow the two equal but opposite forces of relief and sorrow (that were born in the wake of his mother's death) to capture his fortified heart in-the-making. And although the struggle had led to the victory of neither force, yet their batterings were enough to leave him with a fierce sensation of exhaustion: a state in which he was only "half awake"[69]. Needless to say, the lawyer went away "looking quite vexed"[69]. Meursault had half a mind to say that he was "just like everybody else; quite an ordinary person"[70], but he "let it go – out of laziness as much as anything else"[70].

Later in the day, at two in the afternoon, Meursault was taken to the examining magistrate's office for another routine examination. Since there was only a "thin curtain"[70] that shielded the room, it was "flooded with light"[70] and "extremely hot"[70].

The inspection started with an enquiry into the accused's reputation of being a "taciturn, rather self-centered person"[70]. The examinee replied

whereupon, that he “rarely”[70] had “anything much”[70] to communicate and that was why he spoke little. Evidently, Meursault was weary, weary of living a life that had robbed him of all illusions; and since a knowledge stripped of all its enchantments is a stark one, it obviously didn’t take many words to describe it. The magistrate must have missed the point, for he found this important fact to have “little or no”[70] bearing on the case. Wasn’t it Meursault’s despair of this knowledge that eventually led him to commit the murder of God?

Counting on Meursault to help put together the missing links in the case, the examining magistrate wanted to know next, why he had paused between firing the first shot and the second one. Meursault thought of the beach, as it had been then, burning with a “red glow”[71]; he seemed to feel once again “that fiery breath”[71] on his cheeks. The memory of that sickening, agitated feeling was still fresh in his mind; how could he forget those tense moments, in between the two shots, when he had successfully shaken off that numb sensation of powerlessness to actively fire at the enemy?

But Meursault chose not to reply. Neither did he respond when the magistrate asked him why he had gone on emptying his bullets into “a prostrate man”[72].

However, the magistrate was not the one to give up so easily. “Brandishing”[72] a crucifix before Meursault, he proceeded to explain how even “the worst of sinners”[72] had been forgiven, once they had

repented and reposed their faith in Him. But the latter could hardly make out what was being said, for the atmosphere was gradually becoming oppressive with the return of that familiar agitation (“the office was so stifling hot”[72]); also because the man “rather alarmed”[72] him. Considering the highly disturbed state he was in, Meursault was terrified of being coaxed/ coerced into a submission. Of course, he told the magistrate that he didn’t believe in God.

The magistrate was aghast at the denial. He “anyhow”[73] was a “*Christian*”[73],* and therefore failed to perceive why this “poor young man”[73] couldn’t believe that Christ took on the sin of man and suffered for his sake. But, Meursault had had “enough”[73] of this cajoling; he wanted to get rid of this sensation of being bogged down that had taken on a more intense quality with the threats becoming sterner.

Feeling rather let down at having failed to bully Meursault into a confession, the magistrate arrived at the conclusion that the accused’s “soul”[73] was the most “case-hardened”[73] one he had ever known. Apparently, all the other criminals he had come into contact with so far had surrendered themselves to his religious threats. Meursault was the only exception; not only because he refused to be cowed down but also because he didn’t think that the label of a *criminal* could be applied to him. So, it isn’t a crime to do away with the lordship of a ruthless King!

*

My italics

In answering the magistrate's last query ("Did I regret what I had done?"[74]), Meursault replied that he felt "less regret than a kind of vexation"[74]. What annoyed him was a seemingly petty irritant: that of yielding to an unfathomable despair (the heat was at its deadliest at this point). This was the reason why his first shot (fired in self defence) was an entirely passive action. The feeling of little regret explains why he is unhappy in prison.

As these examinations continued (they lasted eleven months), the feeling of uneasiness that they had initially produced grew lesser until Meursault came to "breathe more freely"[74]; at the end of it all, he was "almost surprised"[74] at having enjoyed most "those rare moments"[74], when the magistrate seeing him at the door, would say, " 'Well, Mr. Antichrist, that's all for the present' "[74]. Do we see Meursault beaming with pride?

2

The first few days in prison were spent hoping for "some agreeable surprise"[75] to turn up. However, when Marie's letter came informing him that she would no longer be able to meet him, he "realised"[75] that the prison was his "dead end"[75]. The chance to live life was gone.

In the beginning, Meursault was kept in a room where he had to share the space with several other prisoners, mostly Arabs. It was only some days later, that he was put in a cell where a latrine bucket, a tin basin and a wooden plank kept him company. Sometimes, through a "little window"[75], Meursault would strain himself to catch "glimpses"[76] of the sea -- a blue expanse of peace and indifference. It was during one such moment that he received a visit from Marie -- her first and last one.

The Visitor's Room was an enormous one, divided into three parts by iron grilles that ran across each other. The two grilles were separated from each other by a gap of about thirty feet. Because of this distance that separated the visitors from the prisoners, Meursault had to speak loudly (much like the others, who too yelled away) to Marie to make himself heard. The sole exception were the natives who squatted opposite each other, and in spite of the noise, "managed to converse almost in whispers"[76].

When Meursault came into the room, he noticed that the sunlight "streaming in"[76] from the bow-window had flooded everything in "a harsh, white glare"[76]. This, and the resonating sound of voices, threw him into "quite"[76] a confusion and it took him some time therefore, "to get used to these conditions"[76]. After all, Meursault was habituated to

the “relative darkness”[76] and the “silence”[76] of his cell – in other words, peace that comes from unenlightenment.

Pleasantries were exchanged with Marie. Meanwhile, a fat woman standing beside her was talking in shrill tones to a prisoner standing on Meursault’s right. But what caught Meursault’s attention was the prisoner who stood on his left, “a youngster with thin, girlish hands”[77] whose eyes were fixed on “the little old woman”[77] who stood opposite him. The latter, on her part, “returned his gaze with a sort of hungry passion”[77]. *How devouring is a mother’s love!* However, Meursault had to stop paying heed to them in order to look at Marie who was shouting to him that they (not he), mustn’t “lose hope”[77]. The “silky texture”[77] of her shoulders “fascinated”[77] him; did the “hope”[77] Marie speak of, centre on it?

Both Marie’s and Meursault’s hopes were centred on their unity (the shoulder is a joint); Desire could expect to entangle Man in its grasp and Man could look forward to continue being one. And of course, Meursault wasn’t unaware of Desire’s desire.

Marie assured Meursault that everything would turn out well and they would get married. To which the latter replied: “ ‘Do you really think so?’ ”[78] because some “answer”[78] had to be given. Or did he have a faint inkling of the future?

The woman next to Marie kept on rattling away, while the low, indistinct sound of the Arabs conversing with each other, continued in a dull,

monotonous tone. The light outside “seemed”[78] to have grown stronger and laden with the steady noise, made the aura which pervaded the room an especially severe one. Under its effect, Meursault “began to feel slightly squeamish”[78] – that disgusting sensation of despair? – and wished to go away from that place. “On the other hand”[78], he wanted to enjoy Marie’s company as much as possible, and in her presence he lost count of time. In close proximity with the spirit of life, Meursault ceased to wait for death.

The din of life persisted. The “only oasis of silence”[78] was made by the death-like gaze of the mother and son.

Quiet descended when, one by one, the prisoners were led away. It was a tense moment when Meursault parted from Marie.

It was when Marie’s last letter arrived, that the *grey* period in his life began. It wasn’t “particularly terrible”[79], and Meursault “suffered less than the others”[79]. But the one thing that was “really irksome”[79] was the “habit of thinking like a free man”[79]. Of course, it was impossible to run the clock backwards and the momentary “relief”[79] that his imagination allowed, made him aware of “still more cruelly” [79], this state of being shut in.

Luckily, this phase quickly fizzled out to make way for another, when he had “prisoner’s thoughts”[79]. However, it was only “by

degrees"[79] that he got accustomed to this restricting circumstance he was in; a more rigorous one, no doubt, than his earlier claustrophobic condition, but which yet had its moments of alleviation: "the daily walk in the courtyard"[79] or a meeting with his lawyer, which gave him a chance to "watch"[79] out for the latter's "odd neckties"[79].

Let's pause here to answer a few questions that may be troubling the reader. What is Meursault a prisoner of? Nothing but the human condition, the morning of which starts with death/ despair, moves on to the heat of noon, when in a do-or-die situation, the man of courage opting for the former, ritually kills God only to end up being received by an evening in prison. Why the prison? Because there's no transcendence. Dark night takes up at the point where evening left off, wiping out the few strands of desire left to remain alive, until it is itself erased from the face of the living world by the breaking of dawn.

The "first months"[80] spent in prison were "trying"[80]; but, as time passed, Meursault did manage to get a grip on things around him. The two factors that exceptionally worked to ruffle him were his desire for a woman and a craving for cigarettes. He got rid of the first by conjuring up the "ghosts"[80]* of his "old passions"[80] (although it "unsettled"[80]

* In place of the real Desire, there remained only a semblance of it

him, yet it served to “kill time”[80]), while the second got lost in a natural death of the desire itself.

The whole objective behind keeping people in prison was, as the chief goaler said, to kill their killer instinct. Yet, a man with “brains”[80] could still pull himself together and this was what Meursault did. He tackled the chief problem of whiling away time by breaking each object in his cell into its details, and “finally the details of the details, so to speak”[81]. Obviously this wasn’t enough, for he also “forced”[81] himself to remember the long catalogue he had so produced, “from the start to the finish, in the right order and omitting no item”[81] discovering meanwhile, that “even after a single day’s experience of the outside world, a man could easily live a hundred years in prison”[81]. Waiting would not require much of an effort, as one would have accumulated “enough memories”[81] to keep oneself occupied.

There was sleep too, and that was an advantage. There was nothing better than sleeping away time, and although sleep escaped him in the initial stages, yet there did come a time when he could remain in this state of natural suspension for about sixteen or eighteen hours. He was therefore left with only six hours in hand – which weren’t much. The story of the Czech came in good use during this time, for he could read it over and over again and “fill”[82]up the hours.

The Czech story was the “most unlikely”[82] one in a single respect: that the mother and sister should have “completely failed”[82] to recognise the object of their intimate cruelties. “In another, it was plausible enough”[82], if one considered the fact that death came face to face with man after a gap of twenty five years. “Anyhow”[82], what was most important was that man shouldn’t have tried to pull off “fool tricks of that sort”[82]; he got paid for it quite ruthlessly.

Days “slipped by”[82], and since there wasn’t much difference between the way he spent one day or the other, Meursault soon lost “track of time”[82]. The days were long as periods to be spent, but luckily, they were “so distended that they ended up by overlapping on each other” [83]. A day as such held no relation to its week or month or year; what “kept some meaning”[83] were only “yesterday and tomorrow”[83]; the present that had to be lived through in hope for the future.

Each individual day and its next was being marked. Each day that went by brought Meursault closer to his goal (he became a little more indifferent towards Death).

Six months passed. When Meursault came to know this from the warder, he “shined up”[83] his tin pannikin, and looked into his face. There were the marks of an unexpected, persistent gravity, which didn’t

disappear with his effort to “smile”[83]. Clearly, this kind of “a heroism without God”¹² had cost him his happiness.

“The sun was setting”[83] (on Meursault’s beatitude?) and it was “the nameless hour”[83] – that which is neither day nor night – “when evening sounds were creeping up from all the floors of the prison in a sort of stealthy procession”[83] – to catch him unawares? Looking once again at his reflection in the tin panikin “in the last rays”[83] of the sun, Meursault noticed that his face was “as serious as before”[83], but this time it wasn’t “surprising”[83], for he was going through a solemn moment : with God dead, the only consolation was gone. “*But*”, at the same time”[83], he heard “something”[83]; the “sound”[83] of his “own voice”[83], and he “knew”[83] that all this time he had been talking to himself: is Man his own consolation? Then, is he not alone?

And he remembered the “remark”[83] made by the nurse at his mother’s funeral:

“If one goes too slowly, there’s the risk of a heat stroke. But, if one goes too fast, one perspires and the cold air in the church gives one a chill”[26].

The existential choice? Facing the agony of a nerve-racking despair or the calamitous futility of a hollow consolation!

¹²

• My italics

The tragedy? There was no escape from the detriment involved in making either choice, and “no one can imagine”[83] the wretchedness of a handicapped existence.

3

“On the whole”[84], the days in prison didn’t pass slowly; “almost”[84] a year had passed before he “realised”[84] that the first summer was over. And it was in the second summer of Meursault’s stay in prison when his case came up for a hearing in the Assize Court.

The first day of the trial was one of “brilliant sunshine”[84]. Did it hold out a hope that Meursault’s half-hearted efforts^{**} were going to see the light of the day? What is he trying to do? It was half past seven in the morning when he was taken to the court in the prison van.

The entire trial takes on the aspect of a drama, for Meursault speaks of waiting in a room while the stage was being cleared for his act: there were “sounds of voices, shouts, chairs scraping on the floor: a vague hubbub...”[84] that was mildly exciting. Was Meursault nervous on the eve of his play? “ ‘No.’ ”[84]; in fact, “the prospect of witnessing a trial”[84] only aroused his curiosity. He had never seen one before.

^{**} It was as if, going out to meet Life, Meursault traversed half the distance that lay between them; expecting his partner to cover the other half.

The signal was given: “a small electric bell purred in the room”[84]. Everything was ready. Meursault was led to the prisoner’s dock.

The courtroom was full. “Though the venetian blinds were down, light was filtering through the chinks, and the air was stifling hot *already*”[85].*

Meursault took his seat. He could see directly opposite him, the jury; they were looking at him and Meursault felt “as one does just after boarding a tram and one’s conscious of all the people on the opposite seat staring at one in the hope of finding something in one’s appearance to amuse them”[85]. “Of course, this was an absurd comparison.... still, the difference wasn’t so very great”[85]. For, in both cases, the spectators were on the lookout for diversion; only the sources of titillation were different. Anything to get rid of the boredom that lay heavily on their shoulders!

The audience that had turned up to watch (and pass a verdict on?) Meursault’s performance was a large one. This, coupled with the fact that the windows were shut, made the air stuffy, and under its

* My italics

influence, that sensation of being crushed down was repeating itself, on Meursault. Throwing a quick glance at the gathering that had assembled in the courtroom, the performer discovered that he couldn't "recognise any of the faces"[85]. The world that confronted him was strange, in other words, foreign. There was no familiar face, nothing that could provide even a *passing* comfort. In spite of that, Meursault was flattered to note the large crowd that had turned up on his "account"[85]; he had never ever been a crowd-puller. But, until then, no first performance had held a promise of being so singular either!

The people in the courtroom mingled among themselves, talking and greeting each other, "all seemingly very much at home"[85] there. Only Meursault did not seem to belong to that place. Is he the stranger? Was the world-family behaving quite predictably in being indifferent to the fortunes of one whom they did not *know*?

The Press was there too. A special correspondent of one of the Paris dailies, who had come to cover the parricide case, appearing in Court immediately after Meursault's, was asked by his agency to cover the latter case as well. Enlivened by this piece of news, Meursault was about to remark to one of the elderly journalists that it was "very kind"[86] of the daily to do so, but checked himself because he thought "it would sound silly"[86]. Clearly, the actor wanted his act to be written

about. Why? Because the success of the portrayal lies in it being known.

For an actor, obscurity is death.

Meursault did want to be accepted.

The bell rang a second time. The commotion died down as everyone took his appointed place. A clerk announced that their Honours were entering, and “at the same moment two big electric fans started buzzing overhead”[87]. Three judges came in, two in black and one in scarlet, and they took their places on a bench “which was several feet *above** the level of the courtroom floor”[87]. No wonder then, that they judge. They never understand.

The man in scarlet, who had occupied the central bench, proclaimed that the hearing would commence. An instant change became visible in the courtroom; all the journalists got ready to swing into action with their fountain pens, save one, “a much younger man than his colleagues”[87] who, leaving his work aside, was “gazing hard”[87] at the prisoner. It were not only his eyes that were “riveted”[87] on Meursault; the robot woman too, whom the latter had met at Céléste’s restaurant, had her gaze fixed on him. Faced with their piercing stare, Meursault had the “odd impression”[87] of being “scrutinised”[87] by himself. Meursault performs a spectator’s role in addition to that of an actor.

* My italics

What perspective did this scrutineer adopt? Obviously, an objective one. After all, this introspection was prompted by the keen gaze of none other than a journalist and a robot woman. More important still, is the evaluation that follows such an examination.

Does Meursault try to emulate these two people? Are they his role models?

Not only was this the first occasion when Meursault was behaving in the capacity of a spectator, but it was also Meursault, the actor's, maiden venture on stage. That was why, being unacquainted with the theatrical "procedure"[87], he failed to "follow very well"[87] the narrator's introduction to the performance. All he could catch was some "familiar names of people and places"[87] around which the story revolved.

The witness list was read out next. In it were included the names of all the characters who had an auxiliary role in the play. The audience that had hitherto appeared as a "mere blur of faces"[87] gave way to some really recognisable ones: there was Raymond, Masson, Salamano, the door-keeper and the Warden from the Home; Thomas Pérez, Marie and Céleste. This transformation from the unknown to the known struck the prisoner as rather "strange"[88]. Of course, it won't appear so once he discovers that he can't lean on any of them for support

(although they are the supporting characters in the play!). Meursault must face the music alone. And he ends up doing precisely that.

Meanwhile, the judge expressed the hope that the public would “refrain from any demonstration whatsoever”[88]. Assuring them of a “scrupulously impartial”[88] judgement of the case in hand, he went on to say that in the event of a “disturbance”[88], the proceedings would be brought to a stop.

“The day was stoking up”[88] – was Meursault already on fire? But the trial was yet to go into operation!

The “examination”[88] began with the opening of the act. Having introduced himself before the audience, Meursault went through the “long business”[88] of playing in “detail”[88] the events of his life.

The red-robed judge then took over, and the first thing he asked Meursault was why he had sent his mother to an Institution. Well, the fact was that he didn’t have enough resources to keep her at home. Hadn’t the separation been a cause of “distress”[89]? As for that, neither party “expected much of one another”[89]; that was why each found it easy “enough”[89] to slip into the “new conditions”[89] effected by the absence of the other.

Without looking in Meursault's direction (it was as if he didn't exist), the Prosecutor said that he would like to get two points cleared; had Meursault returned to the stream with "the intention of killing the Arab"[89]? The prisoner answered in the negative. Then, how was it that he was carrying a revolver with him and had gone back "precisely to that spot"[89]? That "matter"[89] was one of "pure chance"[89], came the reply.

There followed "some palavering" [89] between the judge, the prosecutor and Meursault's counsel: After this, the court was adjourned till the afternoon.

The prisoner (isn't the actor a prisoner of his audience and would he not try to be accepted by it,?) was bundled into the prison van, taken back and given his midday meal. After some time, barely enough for him to grasp the fact that he was feeling "tired"[90] he was taken back again. "The heat had meanwhile much increased"[90] and almost everyone was fanning himself. The only incompatibles were the young journalist and the woman, who "as before"[90], kept their gaze fixed on Meursault.

There is nothing like a fan to relieve the heat. But since Meursault, the actor-spectator, wasn't provided with one, he couldn't

break the spell of the highly disturbed atmosphere he was in (“I was barely conscious of where or who I was...”[90]). Did the absurdity and the futility of the trial upset him that much? Does this work to make him somewhat indifferent to its workings? Meursault returned to reality when he heard the Warden’s name being called.

The pivotal and the only event that was taken up for a detailed investigation was none other than the sending away of the mother to the Home. In answer to a series of questions put forward by the judge, the Warden replied that Meursault’s mother did “reproach”[90] him for having sent her to the Home. The message was clear. Meursault was undoubtedly a bad son, for on the day of the funeral, he displayed signs of a “ ‘calmness’ ”[90] that could only astonish the viewer. Elaborating on what he meant by Meursault’s “ ‘calmness’ ”[90], the Warden “lowered”[90] his gaze to say that the son hadn’t “shed a single tear”[90], that he had refused to see the dead body of his mother, and what’s more, he was ignorant of his mother’s age. In a not-so-curious twist, the judge asked the Warden “if he might take it that he was referring to the prisoner in the dock”[90], and the Warden “seemed puzzled”[90]. Did the witness unconsciously betray his own demeaning desires?

The prosecutor had a “look of triumph on his face”[91] on getting hold of such spicy facts. Meursault “realised”[91] then, how much his audience “loathed”[91] him.

The door-keeper came next to give his "evidence"[91]. Throwing a "glance"[91] at the prisoner, he too "looked away"[91]. Corroborating the evidence given by the Warden, he said that it was true that Meursault had "declined"[91] to have even a glimpse of his mother's body. Not only this, the son's partaking of a drink (café au lait) and smoking cigarettes in the presence of the dead were also cited as a guide to his character. The reaction to this piece of information was one of immediate "indignation"[91] that spread like a "wave"[91] through the courtroom, and Meursault took that as a sign of his guilt. Did his relief show through more than his sorrow?

When the counsel pulled up the door-keeper for having smoked too, Meursault in true heroic fashion admitted to having made the offer of a cigarette. The door-keeper was both surprised and grateful at this honest confession and after "humming and hawing"[91] stated that it was he who had "suggested"[91] to Meursault to drink some coffee. Still, courtesy the prosecutor, the son shouldn't have accepted, "if only out of respect of the dead body of the poor woman who had brought him into the world"[92].

Evidently, Society wanted Man to follow the ageless custom of showing deference to Death. But Man wanted to live; slavery is a virtual death. Our hero loved Death, yes, only he wouldn't allow it to rule over him.

Consequently, he attempted to accomplish the difficult task of achieving an indifference towards this King. Even when despair was at its worst and the needle swayed in Death's favour, Meursault put all his might into pushing the needle (i.e. himself) back again. What he is looking out for is the ideal condition, when the needle tips in favour of neither side: Life nor Death. What is indifference but a state of neutrality? But what made this state difficult to obtain was the fact of death being overweight. Nay, it was impossible.....

Thomas Pérez was the third witness. When he was asked about Meursault's behaviour on the day of the funeral, he answered that his "grief"[92] had "sort of blinded"[92] him, and although he was confident about the fact that he didn't see Meursault "weep"[92], yet he couldn't swear to it.

Céleste was a witness for the "defence"[93], i.e. Meursault. The former was probably nervous, for the prisoner noticed that he "kept squeezing his panama hat between his hands as he give evidence"[93]. The restaurateur wore his best Sunday suit, but no collar. When Céleste spoke about Meursault, he betrayed signs of an almost remarkable intimacy with this man: what he said was that his friend was "un homme,"¹³ and when asked to specify what he meant, he replied that

“everyone knew what that meant”[93]. Speaking about the “crime”[93], Céleste was of the view that “it was just an accident or a stroke of bad luck... And a thing like that takes you off your guard”[93].

How true! The meeting with the Arab was indeed an unforeseen one and Meursault was therefore completely unprepared for the vicious turn that events took. Still, he did put up a struggle until he was overwhelmed.

When Céleste stepped down the witness box, “his eyes were moist and his lips trembling”[94]. Meursault was so touched by his sincerity that “for the first time”[94], he wished to “kiss a man”[94].

Marie turned up next, to give evidence. Appearing “very nervous”[94], she confessed (under an almost threatening pressure) that the “liaison”[94] between her and Meursault had begun the day after his mother’s funeral. When the prosecutor “insisted”[95] on getting “a full account”[95] of what they did on that day, she told him of their having gone to the swimming pool, of having visited the cinema hall in order to see a Fernandel film, and later sleeping at his place.

In a tone that was “genuinely”[95] moving, the prosecutor expressed his horror of the man who had plunged headlong into a celebration of life “on the next day after his mother’s funeral”[95]. Of course, nobody listened to Marie when she said that “it wasn’t a bit like that really” [95], and that Meursault “hadn’t done anything really wrong”[95]. Only, in the eyes of Society, it was “really wrong”[95] not to have mourned for the dead.

What fools not to appreciate the fact that it is death that teaches man to live each moment of his life; if everything is going to end some day, isn't it a *crime* to waste time in mourning?

No one paid much heed to Masson who was of the opinion that the prisoner was "a very decent chap"[95] or to old Salamano, when he said that Meursault had always been "kind"[95] to his dog (does this show that Meursault was not inattentive towards the problems of old age? Does this explain too, why he had wanted his mother to be freed from every burden, even life?), and that the son and his mother had "very little in common"[95], which explained why he had kept her away. Certainly there is no common ground in the humanity of Man and the monstrosity of Death.

" 'You've got to understand', he added. 'You have got to understand.' But no one seemed to understand' "[96]. Truth was told to step down from the box. That was "typical of the way"[92] in which the case was being "conducted" [92]. There wasn't any "attempt"[92] made to "elicit the true facts"[92]. Naturally, Meursault was disgusted with the proceedings.

Raymond was the last witness. He started off by explaining that the prisoner was "innocent"[92], and that it was he and not the latter against whom the Arab bore a "grudge"[96]. Describing Meursault's "presence on the beach"[96] that day as a matter of "pure"[96] chance,

he replied to another question from the prosecutor, that the letter which set into motion “this tragedy”[96] was also “due to mere chance”[96].

The prosecutor remarked, whereupon, that “chance”[96] couldn’t furnish an explanation for the prisoner not having intervened to save the girl when she was being beaten by Raymond, nor did it make plain why he had “vouched”[96] for his “intimate friend”[96] at the police station. What lent the whole episode a truly murky colour was the fact that this “associate”[96] was none other than a pimp. And this pimp’s pal was “an inhuman monster wholly without moral sense”[97].

In fact, as the defence lawyer rightly observed, the trial bypassed the murder of the Arab to focus exclusively on Meursault’s crime of indifference. Is this surprising? No, for the prosecutor noted that the two “hung together psychologically”[97]; the way the prisoner behaved at his mother’s funeral “showed he was already a criminal at heart”[97].

Is it a crime to put up a fight against one’s enemy, whoever may it be?

The court broke up. When Meursault stepped out of the courtroom, he became aware of “the once familiar feel of a summer evening out doors”[98]. And as he sat in the “darkness”[98] of his “moving cell” [98], he heard all those sounds of life that he “once enjoyed”[98] and missed now. Having traversed often this “route”[98], in

light (hope) and in darkness (despair), he was conscious of moving on it yet again; only this time, there was almost nothing to illuminate his path.

And Meursault recalled those other evenings that seemed ages ago. Then, the evening would bring with it its gift of cool air (There was a mixture of the tenderness of desire and the gloom of a steadily decreasing hope), which alleviated the tortuous heat of noon, and although he knew that night “awaited” [98] him, yet Meursault rather welcomed it, for a period of “easy” [98] forgetfulness was assured. In striking contrast were these days, spent in the dusk of a life lived in little hope; night was worse, for it loomed large with its “forebodings of the coming day” [98]. Would the morrow convey the worst calamity imaginable, the death of life?

4

There is something magnetic about being paid attention and Meursault liked to listen therefore, to the endless discussions about his personality. In fact, more often than not, the examination concentrated itself on this, rather than on the appropriate/inappropriate manner in which he had portrayed his role in the play. Or is there a connection between the two?

The Counsel for the defence agreed that Meursault was guilty, but circumstantially. The Prosecutor was in harmony with this opinion, except that he “denied extenuating circumstances”[99).

At this stage, the prisoner had one desire – to put in an explanation for himself; of course, he couldn’t do so as his lawyer had “warned”[99) him against this move, in the fear that it would damage the proceedings. Meursault felt as if there was a “conspiracy”[99) afloat not to let him have “any say”[99) in his judgement; his “fate was to be decided out of hand”[99). “However”[99), when he had thought the matter over, he discovered that he had “nothing to say”[99), nothing with which he could defend himself from attack. Is he so vulnerable without God? Obviously, for it is the God - King who protects his *subjects*. That the so-called protection is a slave of good luck is another matter. Only, in hard times, the hope that some one up there may just choose to help you, works wonders for some while, at least. But to have no one above oneself.....

In his long speech, the prosecutor “stressed”[100) the prisoner’s “heartlessness”[100) which, he opined, revealed itself not only in the way the latter had behaved on and after the day of his mother’s funeral, but also in the way he had colluded with Raymond, first “to entice his mistress to his room and subject her to ill-treatment”[100) and then, deliberately provoking a “brawl”[100) with the Arab and later shooting

him down in cold blood on the beach. The fact that Meursault was an “educated man”[100] went against him, because the prosecutor found it impossible to believe that such a person, “ ‘when he committed a crime ... was unaware of what he was doing’ ”[100].

Education no doubt, is a training, but can feelings be schooled? In any case, can a learned person’s inability to retain his balance, for a few moments, be used as an “overwhelming proof of his guilt”[100)?

What served to raise the prosecutor’s ire was the obduracy of the prisoner. There he was right. Meursault didn’t “much regret”[101) his deed, the reason being that he had “always been far too much absorbed in the present moment or the immediate future to think back”[101). *There was Meursault, shuttling between two worlds, sometimes playing a god in indifference and at others, a man in desire.*

As the prosecutor went on and on with his speech, Meursault felt the familiar stirrings of the agitation inside him. The former took up next, for a detailed consideration, what he called the prisoner’s “ ‘soul’ ”[101). Having examined it thoroughly, he was of the opinion that there was “nothing human”[101) about the prisoner, not even the least bit of morality.

One understands the charge of immorality, but does it follow necessarily therefore that the prisoner is inhuman? Animals have no apparent morality. Does that mean...?

It was the role of the bad son that served to clip down Meursault. The prosecutor accused the prisoner of being “morally guilty of his mother’s death”[102] (why did he forget that the latter was only *playing* a role?). An yet more absurd charge of his was one of setting into motion and authorizing such roles! Meursault was found “guilty”[102] too, of the murder that was to be tried the next day, in court. This “other man”[102] had done to death “the father who begat him”[102]. By a strange reasoning, the prosecutor arrived at the inference of Meursault’s second crime, the killing of God, the Father.

The prosecutor did indeed have a “talent”[102], as Meursault noted, for reaching the right conclusion through a false logic.

A “longish silence”[103] succeeded the prosecutor’s ovation. Meursault shared the silent horror of his audience, but unlike them, his surprise was one of disbelief at what he had heard about himself. And he was swamped by the “heat”[103] that followed this “amazement”[103].

Meursault did make a perfunctory attempt (why was it a perfunctory one?) to explain matters when he clarified that he had “no intention of killing the Arab” [103]. Absolving himself from all blame, he

held "the sun "[103) responsible for his crime. Of course, the exposition "sounded nonsensical"[103) and quite expectedly, he heard people tittering.

When the turn came for him to speak, Meursault's lawyer asked for "an adjournment till the following afternoon"[103).

The next day, the "electric fans were still churning up the heavy air and the jurymen playing their gaudy little fans in a sort of steady rhythm"[103). The defence lawyer commenced his speech. It was so long that Meursault soon lost track of what was being said; there was one point however, that caught his attention, and that was the lawyer playing the role of his substitute. Was the rejection so total? It seems that Meursault was ejected altogether from the play. "Anyway, it hardly mattered"[104), as the stranger, by now, had accepted himself.

Even if his half - heartedness had been otherwise, Meursault had only a slim chance of winning his case. Part of the fault lay in his lawyer though, who was "feeble to the point of being ridiculous"[104). This man based his argument on the goodness of the prisoner's " 'soul' "[104) when it is a known fact that the essence of a man's character rarely acts as a determinant of an impulsive action. The lawyer was foolish enough too, to miss the one, vital point that lay right under his nose; that of the funeral. If he was at all looking for excellence, then it

lay surely in the sincerity of the prisoner's feelings in the presence of death.

"Towards the end"[104) of the counsel's speech, Meursault heard "the tin trumpet of an ice-cream vendor in the street"[104)– was that Death beckoning to him? This howsoever slight but dangerous inclination was checked, when the prisoner was reminded of life that was full of "the surest, humblest pleasures: Marie's dresses and her laugh, warm smells of summer, the sky at evening"[104). And the realization of being caught in an intricate web of futilities coming home now more immediately than ever, Meursault was filled with despair. There was only one wish left, having arrived at the fag end of a losing battle: "to get it over"[105) and done with, "and sleep ... and sleep"[105). Peace and rest were the need of the hour.

Meanwhile, the counsel was making his "last appeal"[105) for a judgement of "homicide with extenuating circumstances"[105). When he finished, the judges went to another room to discuss the pros and cons of the case. Some of the lawyer's colleagues came over and congratulated him on the "magnificent show"[105) he had "put up"[105). One went so far as to ask Meursault to testify to the truth of this fact; the latter replied in the affirmative, "but insincerely"[105). This prolonged battle wherein he had fought for an acceptance by his audience had left him too weary "to judge if it had been fine or otherwise"[105).

Once Meursault has assumed full responsibility for his actions and had ceased to look up to others for a commendation/approval, the “cool of the evening”[105] set in. Looking round at the courtroom, he found that “it was exactly as it had been on the first day”[105]. The journalist and the robot woman were there, seated at their places. When he met their eyes, he recalled that “not once during the whole hearing”[105] had he “tried to catch Marie’s eye”[105].

So preoccupied was he in his endeavors to be a God in indifference that his wish to remain a man in desire had taken a back seat for quite some time now! No, he hadn’t “forgotten”[105]. Desire. When Desire smiled at him, he was unable to “return her smile”[105]; his “heart seemed turned to stone”[105]*.

It reminds me, just in time, why this man harps so often on indifference. The reason is plain. It is only a state of equilibrium that can give one a sense of equanimity and mental stability.

The judges came back to the courtroom. A list of questions was read out. Meursault could make out some words here and there: “ ‘Murder of malice aforethought. ... Provocation ... Extenuating circumstances’ ”[106]. The jury went away again and the prisoner was made to wait in the “little”[106] room where he had waited before. The counsel for the defence came to meet him; he was beaming with

* My italics.

confidence and assured Meursault that he would “get off with a few years imprisonment or transportation”[106]. But the latter was interested in “getting the sentence quashed”[106] altogether. For that, “an appeal”[106] was needed, came the reply.

Three – quarters of an hour elapsed. A bell rang. The lawyer left Meursault saying that he would be called in after the foreman of the jury had read out the answers.

The bell rang a second time. The prisoner took his place in the dock, to be greeted by an eerie silence this time. The hearing having been over, it was time for Meursault to form his own estimate of himself, and to accomplish this, he had to take an overall view of all the reactions to his performance that he had examined so far. Consequently, he ran his eyes around the courtroom. The robot woman had vanished. Meursault “noticed”[106], “for the first time”[106] since the trial began, the young journalist’s turned - away gaze. So, the former was no longer the object of the latter’s attention. Was Meursault’s indifference becoming indifferent to him? Although Marie existed, the examiner did not take her into account. “In fact”[106], there was “no time”[106] to take everything into consideration for the presiding judge “had already started

pronouncing"[107) the result of his examination: the prisoner was to be put to a *second death* *.

The world's refusal to accept Meursault into its fold was based on a failure of understanding, naturally. What it couldn't grasp was why this Man wasn't satisfied with just being a man and wanted to be a God as well? Why wasn't he content with only living in the present like other people did, without straining his neck towards the future?

It is Life that put Meursault on trial for having killed the Father who "begat"[102] it. It's Life that rejects him. That was the price he had to pay for being indifferent to it; of course, his "callousness"[68] towards Death too works to nail down his coffin.

5

Night fell.

There was no alternative for Meursault but to meet the prison chaplain. Still, he wanted to put off the meeting as far away into time as was possible; he had "nothing to say"[107] to the latter - there was responsibility, yes, for the deed that he had committed, but no guilt. Naturally enough, there was nothing to confess. Only one thing

* And I saw the dead, the great and small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: And another book was opened, which is *the book of life*: and the dead were judged out of the things which was written in the book, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, *even* the lake of fire.

The Holy Bible, Revelation XX, 12-15

interested him now; to get a chance to escape Death, the “inevitable”[107].

The best defence against an impending misfortune is to keep one’s mind off it and that was what Meursault did. Keeping his hands behind his head and lying down on the ground, he occupied himself by watching the changing colours of the sky, the whole day. He did that while he waited.

Still, nothing served to dispel his obsession for a “loophole”[107]; he was haunted by it day and night, “always wondering”[107] if there had been prisoner-magicians who had been successful with their “vanishing”[107] trick, “in the nick of time”[107] before the blade fell on their neck. Of course he had read news items on executions, but they hadn’t been instructing enough. How he wished that he had perused those “technical books”[108] in which one found those great “escape stories”[108]! “Surely”[108] they would have informed him “that once, if only once, in that inexorable march of events, chance or luck had played a happy part”[108]. Only “a single instance”[108] of that kind would have been enough to clutch the contentment that was fading away fast. Yes, that was the only thing that counted to him: to make a last (no matter how futile) attempt at winning the game he had not yet lost: “the gambler’s last throw”[108]. But, as far as he was concerned, it was a

case of being “caught in the rat trap irrevocably”[108]. He was denied all chances of an escape into the life outside, a life in which one could be *alive*. He missed that, obviously. After all, he had always desired Desire.

The “brutal certitude”[108] of his death exasperated him, and for Meursault, it was inconceivable giving in to this without an opposition. And when he came to think of the trial and the people who had sat in judgement over him, the ridiculousness of it all struck home more forcefully than ever. For, weren't these the same men “who changed their underclothes”[108] like the others did? Notwithstanding, “from the moment the verdict was given, its effects became... cogent”[108]. *That* was nonsensical.

It was to save himself from despair that Meursault would recollect a story his mother told him often. It was about his father whom he had never seen. No wonder then, that the prisoner had never known any protection and/ or domination. And being habituated from the very start to lead a life without them, he had grown suspicious of them, over time.

The story ran like this: once, his father had gone to witness an execution. On returning home, he had fallen “violently sick”[109]. Meursault, since then, had attributed a cowardly temperament to his father. But now, the clouds were beginning to shift: “it was so natural”[109]. “Viewed from one

angle, it's [the execution] the only thing that can genuinely interest a *man*"[109].* For it was only by such a series of vicarious participations that one effected a catharsis of the horror of death. To see the "show"[109], come home and "vomit afterwards"[109] that part of the terrible experience that couldn't be digested; what could be better than that? And, as a result of such ruminations, the prisoner ended up deciding that, in case he got out of prison, he would make it a point to "attend every execution that took place" [109].

Around this time, Meursault gave a new appellation to the man condemned to death, that of a "patient"[109]. Just as a sick man had at least a one percent chance of coming out of his adversity alive, in the same way, the criminal too in Meursault's opinion, ought to be given "a chance, if only a dog's chance"[109] to get away from the shadow of death that loomed large over him. Consequently, "what was wrong about the guillotine was that the condemned man had no chance at all, absolutely none"[110]. "It [the patient's death] was a foregone conclusion"[110]. In a world where everything was dependent on contingency, it was absurd that this official murder alone should stand out with such absolute certainty! What made it more ridiculous was the fact that the condemned man, "against the grain, no doubt"[110], had to

* My italics

“hope”[110] that the knife did its “job”[110] certainly. For if the blade missed its mark, the executioner started again.

There was yet another thing that was “disappointing”[110], if not preposterous, about this system of getting guillotined : the machine was placed “on the same level as the man”[110] and one approached it in the same manner as one went to meet an old enemy who has long since been forgotten. What had “struck”[110] Meursault then, on seeing a photograph of this instrument in a newspaper, was “its shining surfaces and finish”[110]. What won’t man do, to disguise ugliness of any kind! It seemed to him “rather odd”[110] that until now, he should have completely forgotten this recent photograph he had seen and remember instead the pictures of the guillotine used in the 1789 Revolution that appeared in his school books! The ancient apparatus had a flight of steps and the condemned man had to “climb on to a scaffold to be guillotined”[110]. *That* “gave something for a man’s imagination to get hold of”[110]: it was as if one was being freed of every scum of attachment. No wonder then that Meursault remembered the older apparatus, in time.

Since the judgement, Meursault was “always thinking”[111] of two things: the “dawn”[111] and his “appeal”[111] : one of which (life or death), would rescue him from this state of suspension between the two.

“However”[111], he did not want to think about them much, lest they should dominate him entirely and he lose touch with the present. So, looking up at the sky, he “forced”[110] himself “to study it”[110]. At other times, he tried to imagine what it would be like when the beating of his heart stopped. But, “imagination”[111] was never his forte, and he found himself unable to stay in its realms.

Meursault is veering steadily and increasingly towards being God; now, he has to make a compulsive effort to stay a man. The *effort* is unnecessary for.....

The executioners always came at dawn. And all nights he waited in bated breath for that dawn. He wasn't a coward to let life be snatched away from him when he wasn't ready for it. Death would come when it had to, only, he did not want to be found languishing in its presence.

“The worst period of the night was that vague hour when... they usually came”[111] ; so, it was after midnight, that the wait began for the moment when the enemy would walk away with his prized possession. But he was lucky, for he “never”[111] received any signs of the impending tragedy. His mother “used to say that however miserable one is, there's always something to be thankful for”[111]. And each morning, when he was greeted by a flood of light that promised him “a twenty four hours' respite”[112], he remembered and confirmed the truth of that saying. And, wasn't he glad to get yet another chance of fulfilling his goal!

He took time off to think of his “appeal”[112] too. And when he was doing that, what he had in mind was “to squeeze out the maximum of consolation”[112]. So, he “began by assuming the worst”[112], that is, his appeal was nullified. “That meant”[112] that Death had caught up with him. “Sooner than others, obviously”[112]. “But”[112], there was the solace that “life isn’t worth living anyhow”[112]. To his mind, whether he “died now or forty years hence, this business of dying had to be got through, inevitably”[112]. “Still”[112], this thought didn’t help much to cheer up Meursault, for “the idea of all those years of life in hand was a galling reminder!”[112]

It was only at “this stage”[112], when his situation was so utterly devoid of all hope, that he permitted himself the luxury of believing that his appeal had been granted. And how difficult it was to stem the tide of “joy”[112] that ran through his veins! But, he was forced to temper it so that he could make his “consolations, as regards the first alternative, more plausible”[113]. It was only when he had done that, that a “good hour’s peace of mind”[113] was ensured.

Meursault “fell to thinking”[113] about Marie also, but in a long time. “Probably... she had grown tired of being the mistress of a man sentenced to death”[113]. After all, he had hardly been paying any attention to the desire for life ever since they parted ways. Meursault

surmised that Marie was “ill” [113] or had died. He had no clear cut idea about what had befallen her, for the only “link”[113] between him and her were their “two bodies, separated now”[113]. It was Desire that had reminded him that life was mean to be *lived*; now that she was gone, there was “nothing”[113] to remind him of Life. “Supposing she [Desire] were dead, her memory would mean nothing”[113]; obviously, for can one lead life on borrowed memories? He “couldn’t feel any interest in a dead girl”[113]: what excitement can a dead Desire generate? “This”[113] was “quite normal”[113] : he couldn’t help noting at this point, that when he was dead, people would forget him too. And Meursault concluded by believing that “there’s no idea to which one doesn’t get acclimatized in time”[113].

Something natural had happened. Meursault had been so taken up with what he wanted to achieve that gradually, it was only this that prevailed over him and the desire to live got lost somewhere on the way. Then, was it a dead life weighing in the pan?

In fact, this man was so out of touch with Desire that he didn’t even know how she fared. Was she alive and well?

Still, the hope that she may yet be his hadn’t eclipsed with her disappearance. Some day, she might... and then he could share once again, the *balance* that he had been missing since.

Meursault's thoughts were focussed on Marie, when the chaplain "walked in, unannounced"[113]. The prisoner was startled, for he took the visit to mean that his appeal had been turned down. The chaplain assured him, however, that it was "a friendly visit"[113]. Seating himself on the bed, he bid Meursault (the latter was lying down on the floor) do the same; but the prisoner refused, for he did not think one should share a seat with someone who was so unlike one. Are cowardly beliefs infectious?

Meursault looked at the priest while he sat. The man sat "quite still"[113], with his hands on his knees, and "his eyes fixed on his hands"[114]. The long, bony hands reminded Meursault of "two nimble little animals"[114]. Subsequently, the chaplain rubbed them together. Was he warming up to catch his prey? Then, again he became still, so still that Meursault "almost forgot"[114] the former's presence. How could the latter live and yet be so serene and at peace with himself?

Suddenly, the attacker "jerked his head up"[114], and looked in the eyes of his victim. Apparently, the chaplain was quite bold. Was it because he was sure of walking away with his prey in hand? The next thing he did was to ask Meursault why he had denied him a meeting. That was because he "didn't believe in God"[114], came the prisoner's reply. In any case, to Meursault, whether he had faith in Him or not wasn't important. What was more important was his faith in himself, for it was

this that had made him struggle successfully despite obstacles and was making him not give up the fight as yet....

Just as an animal draws back before taking the final plunge at its victim, the chaplain too “leant back against the wall”[114]. Following this, he put into action one of his tricks (its objective was to disarm Meursault); what the attacker did was to state, without addressing his victim directly, that “he’d often noticed one fancies one is quite sure about some thing, when in point of fact one isn’t”[114]; and didn’t the addressee think so too? That was “quite plausible”[114], came the response; only, as far as the initial question was concerned, the prisoner was “absolutely sure”[114] of it not being valid at all, in his case.

The chaplain “looked away”[114], to continue giving Meursault that false sense of ease. His succeeding question was: did the prisoner feel “desperate”[114]? If so, God could help him out of his “trouble”[114]. Meursault made clear that his feeling wasn’t one of “despair... but fear – which was natural enough”[114]. Whatever may it be, he was sure about not wishing to load his burden on someone else’s shoulders.

Clearly, the priest’s attack had been repulsed. So, the reaction was one of disturbance that showed itself in the way the priest “fluttered his hands”[115]. The course of action must be changed. Believing that, the attacker donned a disguise: that of a “friend”[115]. And wasn’t it a friend’s duty to pull down another by reminding him of “the terrible, final hour”[115] of his death? Only, the priest was somewhat nonplussed

when Meursault answered that he would confront it in full consciousness, without flinching, without crying out for help.

Thereupon, the priest “stood up”[115]. Having been inspired with his previous successes of a frontal attack, he looked at Meursault “straight in the eyes”[115] again. Did that weaken the latter’s resistance and make him submit? No, for he himself was an old hand at it, and the “trick”[115] therefore failed to hit its mark. Nevertheless, the priest quite unabashedly, brought out the best bait for Meursault’s consideration: that of a hope that lay beyond the grave. Surely now the prisoner would fall a prey to him? But it was not to be. The attacker therefore ended up by becoming “distressed”[115] ; his eyes “dropped”[115] and his voice took on an “agitated, urgent”[115] tone. Consequently, Meursault became more attentive.

This time, the priest toed a different line, that of making Meursault “conscious”[116] of having wronged God, so that the latter would give in automatically. Of course, the prisoner denied having sinned; refusal to believe in Him wasn’t a “sin”[116]. As far as he “knew”[116], his offence was one against man and he was “paying the penalty of that offence”[116].

“Just then”[116], it “struck”[116] Meursault that if the priest wished to change his posture, he could opt for either “standing up”[116] or “sitting down”[116]. What was remarkable was how this man lived as a mere shadow of his self, having put himself on imaginary heights, while he

was confined to a prostrate position on the floor. But it was this very strength that lay in the prisoner's refusal to compromise with reality that shook the confidence of the attacker. The latter "took a single step... and halted, as if he didn't dare to come any nearer"[116].

Coaxing had failed to work. So it was replaced by an increasing pressure on the victim. The prisoner *would* be "required to see"[116] God's face on the walls of the prison; in fact, the priest had known many, some even the wretchedest, who had turned to Him to relieve them of their suffering. Meursault would do so too, that was his firm belief.

That peppered up the prisoner. He had not known anybody/ anything "better"[116] than he knew the stone walls: after all, he shared its qualities of strength and indifference. "And, once upon a time"[116], Meursault "perhaps used to try"[116] to realise "Marie's face"[116] as he looked at them. It was the face of Desire: so, he had tried (not very eagerly though) to resuscitate a dying Desire! But he was unlucky, for he had "never"[116] been successful and now he had stopped making the effort.

Meursault failed to keep the *best* of both worlds.

The chaplain gave Meursault a long, mournful look. The latter's back was to the wall and "light was flowing"[117] over his forehead. Taking up again the point which he had left half-way, the priest became more passionate, more unyielding, as he forced Meursault to acknowledge his weakness for an "after life"[117]. Yes, Meursault answered, he had

certainly had that wish; only, the wish was on a par with the much trivial ones he had had: "wishing to be rich, or to swim very fast, or to have a better-shaped mouth"[117]. He was continuing when the chaplain queried: how did he "picture"[117] his "life in the grave"[117]? Well, if he could choose, it would certainly be a life in which he could "remember"[117] and hold in regard therefore, this one that he had lived and fought and was about to give up. Then, going up very close, Meursault told the chaplain that he had had enough of him. Since there remained "very little time"[117], he "wasn't going to waste it on God"[117].

The attacker made a last ditch attempt to win over his victim by changing into the role of a "Father"[117]. But, Meursault was not to be hoodwinked: he knew that this man had come not to protect him, but to make his spirit yield to a domination against which he had been fighting his whole life. The priest assured him of the "contrary"[117], but without success.

It was then that Meursault's tolerance broke down. And, catching the priest by his cassock, "in a sort of ecstasy of joy and rage"[118] he shouted at him as loudly as he could.

This man, who had come to kill off one in whom burnt the "dark, burning flame"¹⁴ of life, was doing it for the sake of a faith. And what a faith that required one to live like a "corpse"[118] in anticipation of better times to

come! In contrast, Meursault was “sure about everything, far surer than he”[118], for he lived in the “present”[118], without taking his eyes off the fact that the future would put an end to everything one day. Of course, this attitude was nothing praiseworthy, but still, all things said and done, the “certainty”[118] of having put up a valiant struggle was his, although the struggle itself was an absurd one. And the very fact that he had not shied away from it (like the priest had), was *the* important thing. He “had been right”[118], he “was still right”[118], he “was always right”[118] to have “passed”[118] his life in a veritable indifference. He “hadn’t done x”[118] but had opted for “y or z.”[118]. “And what did that mean”[118]? That he had been “waiting for this present moment, for that dawn, tomorrow’s or another day’s”[118] which would “justify”[118] him. Death blotted out every trace of significance; but wasn’t it still better to *try* to bring a measure of meaning in one’s life by fighting against its dominance? And wasn’t this indifference the most lethal weapon in Meursault’s hands, one that ensured that the enemy never touched him? *Death would then have lost its potency.* Now, on the verge of death, the circle of indifference was almost completed.* Nothing made a difference to our hero – no, not Raymond’s friendship, nor the fact that he was being “executed”[118] for his crime. Even “a mother’s love”[119] mattered very little at this juncture, “since it all came to the

* It is only at the point of death, that he can think of it with absolute unconcern; for doesn’t a thing lose its value only when one obtains it?

same thing in the end"[118]. "Every man alive was privileged"[119] – surely, it was a privilege to live life; "there was only one class of men, the privileged class"[119] – who strove to be neutral in the face of both life and death. "All alike would be condemned to die one day... the same thing for Salamano's wife and for Salamano's dog"[119].

Life, along with Desire, had found Meursault "guilty"[119] of adopting an indifferent attitude towards them. This charge was acceptable to him, but Meursault believed that a point had obviously been overlooked. What about Desire, who had wished to entangle him in her embrace? Wasn't she guilty too, along with the others of her group? Whether it be the robot woman or Masson's wife or Marie, weren't they all wrongdoers? And didn't marriage, the link that desire formed with man, work in favour of the former? Witness how she got increasingly fatter, feeding herself on him (refer to Meursault's observation about married couples).

Meursault had been shouting so much that he started panting. The warders came in and released the priest from his grasp.

Once his attacker left, Meursault became calm again. But this "excitement"[119] had cost him his energy, and he dropped off to sleep. When he woke up, he discovered that "the stars were shining"[119]. The "marvellous peace"[119] of the night overcame him.

“Just on the edge of daybreak”[119], he heard the noise of a steamer’s siren. “People were starting on a voyage to a world”[119] that no longer concerned him. “Almost, for the first time in many months”[119], Meursault remembered his mother, who had made a similar journey. And “now”[120], he “understood”[120] why his mother had made “a fresh start”[120]. “In that Home where lives were flickering out, the dusk came as a mournful solace”[120]; it was definitely a “solace”[120] to be so near “freedom”[120], but it was still “mournful”[120] to let go of a struggle that had been its own reward. And not a grain of doubt was left in the son’s mind about his mother being very brave (this is the second and the last time that he refers to her as “my mother”[120]) to have taken on the struggle again (she had a fiance), when everything around her reminded her that her time to play the game was almost up.

Death is not only impious but courageous too, like Man; witness its respect for no one; witness too, how it lays down everybody/ everything that comes in its path.

Like his mother, Meursault too “felt ready”[120] to start on a new voyage. Ceasing to be a stranger to the impossible, he geared himself up to wait for the probable. “It was as if”[120] the great tide of rage had “emptied”[120] him of the mad “hope”[120] that Desire may still be his. And, “for the first time”[120], realising the reasons behind “the benign indifference of the universe”[120], he accepted them, for he felt them to be so much akin to his. After all, it was this attitude that had brought

him happiness. "For all to be accomplished"[120], for the prisoner to have broken his chains *completely* from Life, for him to negotiate that distance of a hair's breadth that lay between him and his God-image, for him to shake off his shoulders that part of the battle he had lost in part (he had well-nigh ceased to be man in spirit) and not in whole (he was still a man in flesh and blood), Meursault hoped for "a huge crowd of spectators"[120] on the day of his execution, welcoming him "with howls of execration"[120] (nothing less than a complete liberation would suffice, now that he was leaving the world for ever). What Meursault wished for, could be achieved only with his death. Naturally, it was impossible to remain a man.

Indifference went a step ahead, in hatred. That, if anything, was a complete liberation while indifference was only half-way towards it.

Chapter III

Ni victimes ni bourreaux.

Albert Camus

Title to eight articles published
between 19th & 30th November,
1946 in Combat.

Source: Notebooks 1942-1951

Of pestilences and victims

In a world where God is dead, happiness can yet be achieved. In L'Étranger, if Camus had described positively the way to achieve an earthy transcendence, then he does so negatively in The Plague; more particularly in Tarrou's confession to Dr. Rieux that occurs in Part 4 of the book.

Just before Tarrou and the doctor go for their first swim in the sea (since the plague broke out), the former decides to acquaint the latter with the story of his life. Insisting that one begins to live only when one "started thinking" [222], he tells Dr. Rieux of an experience that shattered the child in him. His father, who was a prosecuting attorney, had taken him to court to see how he worked. What happened there was an eye-opener for the young Tarrou. The geniality and good-naturedness with which he had always associated his father, faded away before the insistent "clamoring" [224] of this red-robed man who could be satisfied with nothing less than the death of the accused. And as he looked at the prisoner, Tarrou couldn't help feeling a "terrifying intimacy" [224] with him who appeared "genuinely horrified at what he'd done and what was going to be done with him" [224]. Ultimately, the prosecutor won the case but the father lost his son.

That was the beginning, "since... it really was the start of everything" [226]. Tarrou took up cudgels against the "social order... based on the death sentence" [226], believing meanwhile that by doing so, he would be "fighting against murder" [226]. True, for all *order* is really based on a principle of conquer and rule. After all, it's this that gives a false

sense of maximum security to all those who practice it. What Tarrou resisted was this principle of dominance that ran through every network of human relationships. Aren't all men born equal?

"Needless to say" [226], Tarrou knew that he was guilty, albeit occasionally, of passing "sentences of death" [226] on those who opposed what he stood for. Hadn't he tried to overshadow them? But he was made to understand that "these few deaths were inevitable for the building up of a new world in which murder would cease to be"[226], when power would be evenly proportioned between men. Although the inevitability factor gave him sleepless nights, yet the remembrance of "that miserable owl in the dock" [226] whipped up his efforts. Matters took a more serious turn however, when he got a chance to witness an execution in Hungary — and the "same dazed horror" [226] followed.

This first-hand confrontation with a brutal murder of "a living human being" [224] led him to seriously analyse his actions. When he thought of the zeal with which he had been laying down his opponents during "those long years" [227], he was horrified to realise that the charge of murder boomeranged on him! He learnt subsequently, that he had had "an indirect hand" [227] in wiping out thousands, "by approving of acts and principles which could only end that way" [227]. Tarrou's moral concerns were snubbed by the people of his group, who justified what they were doing with the same arguments that the opposite camp used: that of "necessity and *force majeure*" [227]. Strange but unavoidable, that one had to adopt a means, the end of which did not justify it all!. The result? "A sort of competition" [228] of murder and mayhem.

Tarrou's staunch sense of propriety refused to have anything to do with an unethical, how much indispensable measure used to obtain a desired end. And so, he decided to hold himself in abeyance, joining neither camp, till he could seek a "way" [228] that promised a more clear, more honest vision.

As time passed, he discovered that "even those who were better than the rest" [228] had the "plague" [228] within them, that no one in the world was spared from it. For it was impossible to interact at all "without the risk of bringing death to somebody" [228]: don't all interactions move between the two poles of ascendancy and suppression? Has "peace of mind" [227] then been lost forever? No, one could still try, according to Tarrou, to "cease being plague-stricken" [228], cease allowing the despot in one to have a play. "This, and only this, can bring relief to men and, if not save them, at least do them the least harm possible and even, sometimes, a little good" [228]. In fact, Tarrou went to the extent of denying to assert himself even "for good reasons" [229].

Yes, he was sure that "each of us has the plague within him... that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him" [229]. It was "natural" [229] to have the "plague-germ" [230]; still, one could be healthy and pure by avoiding the dangerous attraction of contaminating others with one's beliefs and opinions. This exercise was "a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter" [229]. It was definitely "a wearying business" [229] to be on the constant look out for victims, but, it was "still more wearying" [229] to

* Keep a weight on a balance against another, and watch the pan going up and down as you try to balance both weights.

deny the temptation to do so. Death, only death could free people who “wanted to get the plague out of their systems” [229].

It was left to Tarrou to condemn himself to an unending “exile” [229], having made up his mind not to influence others. The other - the murderer, absolved himself by citing reason in his favour; he had to kill in order to hold his own in a bad world. However, as things stood, Tarrou was “willing” [229] to efface himself rather than others. Believing that in a world where there are “pestilences and victims” [229], it was one’s bounden duty to keep away from the first camp, Tarrou sided with the victims. Meanwhile, the important thing that had to be kept in mind was to shun “arguments” [229], that poison of persuasion which worked to win over the other.

A third group yet existed: “that of the true healers” [230], who protected the defeated, mending them till they became whole. Dr. Rieux was one such man.

Dominance brings about death; indifference, an equality.

Chapter IV

'Tis but thy* name that is my enemy.

William Shakespeare

Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Sc. 2.

* Read 'my'

The choice of an Arab

Some time ago, when I was still going through a rigorous reading of the text, one point among others, caught my attention: none of the Arabs, who figure in L'Étranger, have been assigned a name. Apart from a few exceptions, all the Europeans are encapsulated within the confines of one. What gives a name the character of a captor? Is it the singularity of the identity it bequeaths to a man? As for what it takes away, well , it strips man of his very ease. It seizes and takes hold of him, whereas he seldom possesses it. Every man has this impossible desire to be a God on earth ; only a few possess the arduous courage needed to make the journey. The Arabs, for instance. What about Meursault.?

What makes Camus accord this prerogative to the Arabs and deny it to the Europeans (Meursault being an exception)? If the Europeans have gained something in the name of a 'civilisation', they have lost something far more significant: an intimacy with innocence, the only promise of beauty. This is precisely what strikes Meursault when he observes the world flow past him: dressed in their "red ties, coats cut very short at the waist and square-toed shoes"[30], the people betrayed a ridiculousness which is born of a shamefaced innocence. As he examines them, the absurdity of the frenzy with which these people buried themselves in life: their work, expectations, worries, surprises him. Only the Arabs being "nearer to nature

in a thousand ways: their clothes, the form of their shoes”¹ were nearly freed from every care of life, from death. Their nakedness made them demigods on earth.

Interestingly, the only time Meursault describes the appearance of an Arab, he speaks of the bandage that lay^r round the face of the Arab nurse because of which,^{one} hardly^{saw} anything of her face except that strip of *whiteness*”[17].*

It is this higher god against whom Meursault (a lesser god in comparison) is pitted. And just as an ironsmith checks the tenacity of the iron by hitting it mildly at first (before aiming the final blow), the outbursts of violence** that precede the final one (the killing of the Arab), are the moderate blows directed at the enemy, before He is done away with, completely. Even when the Arabs do put in an appearance in Part II of the book, their role is relegated to that of prisoners. In fact, as Meursault notes, the prisoners are “mostly”[75] Arabs. This time, the vehemence points at their liberty. It was as if it was dangerous to have too many of them roaming free; it could incite others (besides Meursault and Raymond) to frenzied acts of violence. In any case, the prison is a befitting place for someone who has cheated man of his happiness: look what Raymond’s girl did to him.

Thus did Camus choose and vindicate his choice of an Arab.

* My italics.

** The Arab nurse is the recipient of a natural violence.

Chapter V

Having completed a task means having become eternal.

Lao-tse

Quoted in V.E.Frankl's

Psychotherapy and Existentialism, 19

The propriety of an inconclusiveness

The beginning of the novel shares a similarity with its ending: in both cases, the protagonist is getting ready to start on a journey. But, what's yet more interesting is, that in these two instances, the paths to be traced out, one to Marengo and the other to an unknown destination, had once been walked upon by his mother. Is that an example of a son following his mother's footsteps? On the contrary, L'Étranger is the narrative of a son trying very hard to elude his pursuer (and a stubborn one!), a dead mother. It's precisely this obstinate presence of death that holds the two parts of the book together.

Since I stressed on a resemblance between the first and last pages of the text, there is obviously a point in contrast. And it's an important one at that. While the first journey materialises, the second and the last one doesn't. The question arises: why doesn't Camus permit Meursault to cross the threshold of his aspirations, in the second case?

To perceive the situation more clearly, let's take a peep into the hopes and aspirations of Meursault. It's not difficult to see then, that this character has only one wish: to attain the power of a God while yet remaining a man. But pray, what good may that serve? Well, one's provided with a sanctuary in the Paradise on earth. Only, one needn't see the wish to its completion....

When the text opens, Meursault has already achieved an attitude of indifference towards two factors that governed him: Life and Desire ; he was only too anxious to be done with the third, i.e. Death.

A striking point of the novel is Camus' treatment of time. In the first half of the novel, each day is marked with reference to its place in the week. In the next half, Meursault just about manages to set the boundaries of one day passing into the other. One might ask at this point: why does Meursault take so much care to note the passage of days? That's because each day that goes by brings him closer to his death and consequently, makes him more indifferent towards it. This process, however, leads Meursault to his obvious inability to fulfil the latter half of the aim. But, so intent is he on being God that his slip-in-part ceases to matter anymore and he waits eagerly for the breaking of dawn that will communicate to him the news of his success. Of course, the dawn never breaks. It never will break. Meursault can only look to a fulfillment in anticipation. Since the anticipation never gets over, the fulfillment is never complete.

Camus spares Meursault the torture of having left nothing to achieve.

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