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## *L'Étranger* and the Messianic Myth, or Meursault Unmasked

BENEDICT O'DONOHUE

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Writing about *L'Étranger* just after its fiftieth anniversary, the erstwhile doyen of Camus studies, Édouard Morot-Sir, reviewed some of the critical commonplaces about Camus's iconic hero in an article aptly entitled: "Actualité de *L'Étranger*." How and why was it, Morot-Sir enquired, that Meursault should remain "une énigme vivante et attachante" (18) [a vital and attractive enigma]<sup>1</sup> for Camus's readers more than half-a-century after his creation? Thinking through his own question, Morot-Sir recalls some of Camus's potential alternative titles: "La Pudeur" [Modesty], "Un Homme heureux" [A Happy Man], "Un Homme libre" [A Free Man], "Un Homme comme les autres" [A Man Like Any Other] (19), stating his preference for the first of these, though also connecting it to each of the others:

... il se méfie de ces langages du sentiment que la société invente ... Il est aussi l'homme le plus libre qui soit, c'est-à-dire libéré des idéologies morales; à sa manière il est aussi heureux qu'on peut l'être, ... authentique et non-artificiel. Enfin, il est l'homme universel ... avant tout, *l'étranger*, celui qui est détaché et capable de se regarder lui-même avec lucidité (19).

[... he distrusts those sentimental languages that society invents ... He is also the freest of men, that is to say liberated from moral ideologies; in his way, he is as happy as it is possible to be, ... authentic and not artificial. In short, he is the universal man ... above all, the outsider, the man who is detached and capable of watching himself with lucidity.]

As if this extravagant litany of grandiloquent plaudits were not yet sufficient endorsement of this modern superman, Morot-Sir goes on to praise Meursault's refusal to bend to the exigencies of power and ascribes to him modesty, dignity and lucidity that amount, albeit "discreetly," to a

“mythic dimension” and, in short, to an “heroic life” (21). Recalling that Roland Barthes had already described Meursault as “a solar hero” (22), Morot-Sir paraphrases Barthes in order to bring his canonisation of Meursault to a resounding climax:

C'est à partir d'un degré zéro de valeur que Meursault retrouve l'authenticité des sentiments et la vérité de l'être. ... loin d'être un héros banal ... il est l'être le plus rare qui soit, pauvre en esprit mais prêt à reconquérir toutes les richesses du monde (23).

[It is from the degree zero of value that Meursault rediscovers the authenticity of feelings and the truth of being. ... far from being a commonplace hero ... he is the rarest being there is, poor in spirit but ready to conquer all the riches of the world.]

If we can stand back from the rhetorical effect of this hyperbolic hagiography of an amoral protagonist who penetrates to the very “truth of being” by virtue of his very amorality, we shall find good cause to question these entrenched *idées reçues*.

This strain of eulogy for Camus's social misfit was started by none other than Jean-Paul Sartre in his seminal critique, “Explication de *L'Étranger*,” published in February 1943.<sup>2</sup> Interpreting the novel as essentially an illustration of Camus's theory of the Absurd, as expounded in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* [*The Myth of Sisyphus*], Sartre sees the “absurd man” as “innocent in every sense of the word”:

L'étranger qu'il veut peindre, c'est justement un de ces terribles innocents qui font le scandale d'une société parce qu'il n'accepte pas les règles de son jeu. Il vit parmi les étrangers, mais pour eux aussi il est un étranger. ... en vain chercherions-nous à le juger selon nos normes accoutumées: pour nous aussi il est un étranger (96-97).

[The outsider that he wants to depict is precisely one of those terrible innocents who cause scandal in society because they do not accept the rules of the game. He lives amidst outsiders, but for them too he is an outsider. ... we would seek in vain to judge him according to our customary norms: for us too, he is an outsider.]

Sartre's enthusiasm to bear witness for the defence leads him to assert that Meursault legitimately lies beyond the reach of any orthodox moral judgment, that he is quintessentially

innocent. But why should this be so? Might we not, on closer examination, wish to place greater emphasis upon “terrible” than upon “innocent”?

Probably encouraged by Sartre’s analysis, which he must certainly have read, Camus himself—writing in 1955, by which time his little book was already established as a modern classic—first echoed Sartre’s verdict, then went on to embellish it:

... le héros du livre est condamné parce qu’il ne joue pas le jeu. En ce sens, il est étranger à la société où il vit, ... il refuse de mentir ... Loin qu’il soit privé de toute sensibilité, une passion profonde ... l’anime, la passion de l’absolu et de la vérité. / On ne se tromperait pas beaucoup en lisant dans *L’Étranger* l’histoire d’un homme qui, sans aucune attitude héroïque, accepte de mourir pour la vérité. Il m’est arrivé de dire aussi, et toujours paradoxalement, que j’avais essayé de figurer dans mon personnage le seul Christ que nous méritions (Camus, “Préface” 1928-29).<sup>3</sup>

[... the hero of the book is condemned because he does not play the game. In this sense, he is a stranger to the society in which he lives, ... he refuses to lie ... Far from being bereft of all sensitivity, a deep passion ... animates him, a passion for the absolute and for truth. / One would not be far wrong in reading *The Outsider* as the story of a man who, without any pretensions to heroism, accepts to die for the truth. It so happens that I have also said of him, still paradoxically, that I had tried to represent in my protagonist the only Christ we deserve.]

This is what is known in the vernacular as “upping the ante.” By comparison with this authorial deification of Meursault, albeit “paradoxical,” Morot-Sir’s beatific aspirations on his behalf pale into insignificance. My intention in this essay is to challenge these resilient dogmas about Camus’s famous protagonist and, in short, to explode what I call the “messianic myth” surrounding him. I propose to do so by paying close attention to Camus’s text which reveals its narrator to be—so far from the Christ-like innocent everyman of conventional appraisal—a paranoid sociopath whose defining characteristic, not to say besetting sin, is a deeply ingrained machistic misogyny.<sup>4</sup>

To begin with, I want to inventory some of the themes that recur in the foregoing quotations, and to suggest alternative readings of the terms used by shifting our critical and

semantic perspectives upon them. For example, we are told that Meursault is “innocent” and “free,” whereas he is demonstrably *guilty* (of killing another man, at the very least) and leads a pretty circumscribed existence even before he is *imprisoned*. We read approvingly that he is a maverick who “rejects the rules of the game,” that he is “amoral”; but another name for those who do not play by the rules is *cheat*, and a generic epithet for a cheat might be *immoral*. Meursault is “marginal” and “solitary,” but also “sensual” and “happy”; alternatively, he is a *pariah* who is understandably *friendless*, given that he is *brutish* and generally *miserable*. It seems that he is “authentic” and “unartificial”—or should that be *boorish* and *unsympathetic*? Is he really a “vital, attractive enigma,” or more of an *intriguing freak*? Is he “modest and sceptical of sentimental language,” or rather *dull, inarticulate and psychopathic*? He might very well “resist social convention” and “rebel against power,” but does not this merely make him a *futile sociopathic anarchist*? So far from being the “universal” man, he is decidedly *peculiar*, an “outsider” who is in truth an *outcast*. His so-called “dignity” could easily be mistaken for apathetic *indifference*, and his “passionate truthfulness” for *stupidity*. In short, I shall contend that this “mythic hero” is in fact an *over-hyped anti-hero*.

I want next to focus on Meursault’s psychopathology of paranoia, which designates him clearly as a suitable case for treatment, because he moves from *feeling guilty when innocent*, in Part 1 of his story, to being *incapable of appreciating his guilt, when guilty*, in Part 2. It is quickly apparent that Meursault is, so to speak, constitutionally guilty or paranoid, for example when he gratuitously excuses himself for the timing of his mother’s death: “Je lui ai même dit: ‘Ce n’est pas de ma faute.’ Il n’a pas répondu. J’ai pensé alors que je n’aurais dû dire cela. En somme, je n’avais pas à m’excuser” (9–10; pt. 1, ch. 1).<sup>5</sup> [I even said to him: ‘It’s not my fault.’ He didn’t reply. I thought then that I ought not to have said that. In short, I didn’t need to excuse

myself.] Or again, apologising to the director of the retirement home because he senses, erroneously, that he is being blamed: “J’ai cru qu’il me reprochait quelque chose et j’ai commencé à lui expliquer. Mais il m’a interrompu: ‘Vous n’avez pas à vous justifier, mon cher enfant. ... elle était plus heureuse ici’” (11; pt. 1, ch. 1). [I thought he was reproaching me for something and I began to explain to him. But he interrupted me: ‘You don’t need to justify yourself, my dear boy. ... she was happier here.’] These paranoid, self-reproaching sentiments obsessively recur, and find their most deluded expression at the moment when Meursault mistakes the nodding line of grieving pensioners for a putative jury: “C’est à ce moment-là que je me suis aperçu qu’ils étaient tous assis en face de moi à dodeliner de la tête, autour du concierge. J’ai eu un moment l’impression ridicule qu’ils étaient là pour me juger” (19; pt. 1, ch. 1). [That’s the moment when I noticed that they were all sitting opposite me, around the concierge, nodding their heads. For a moment I had the ridiculous impression that they were there to judge me.] His repeated protestations that his mother’s death is “not his fault” culminate in this dismal dictum of self-inculpation, the motto of the paranoiac: “De toute façon, on est toujours un peu fautif” (35; pt. 1, ch. 2). [In any case, we are always a little bit to blame.]

Paradoxically, however, despite his inherent and radical sense of guilt, Meursault—once he is indeed plainly guilty of a particular crime—finds it difficult or impossible to apprehend himself as such:

‘... Les criminels qui sont venus devant moi ont toujours pleuré devant cette image de la douleur.’ J’allais répondre que c’était justement parce qu’il s’agissait de criminels. Mais j’ai pensé que moi aussi j’étais comme eux. C’était une idée à quoi je ne pouvais pas me faire (109; pt. 2, ch. 1).

[‘The criminals who have come before me have always wept before this image of suffering.’ I was about to answer that it was precisely because they were criminals. But then I thought that I too was like them. It was an idea I couldn’t get used to.]

It is as if his subjective sense of essential guilt—which betrays an underlying and generalised essentialist worldview (criminals *are* criminals, for example)—prevents him from feeling any specific existential guilt. By the same perverse process, whereas he had previously mistaken a line of mourners for a jury, he now mistakes the jury proper for a benchload of bus passengers:

Tous me regardaient: j’ai compris que c’étaient les jurés. ... Je n’ai eu qu’une impression: j’étais devant une banquette de tramway et tous ces voyageurs anonymes épiaient le nouvel arrivant pour en apercevoir les ridicules. Je sais bien que c’était une idée niaise puisque ici ce n’était pas le ridicule qu’ils cherchaient, mais le crime. Cependant la différence n’est pas grande et c’est en tout cas l’idée qui m’est venue (129; pt. 2, ch. 3).

[They were all looking at me: I realised they were the jurors. ... I had only one impression: I was standing opposite the bench seat on a tram, and all these anonymous passengers were eyeing up the newcomer to spot his ridiculous flaws. Now, I know this was a stupid idea since it was not the ridiculous they were looking for here but the criminal. However, the difference is not great and that is, in any case, the idea that came to mind.]

Common sense suggests that the difference between the ridiculous and the criminal is, in fact, glaring and significant, so that Meursault’s assimilation of the two strikes me as eccentric, to say the least. His idiosyncratic take on events is such that he can easily be made to feel guilty in respect of his mother, a feeling that we have already seen him experience repeatedly in Part 1: “Il a dit que je n’avais pas voulu voir maman, que j’avais fumé, que j’avais dormi et que j’avais pris du café au lait. J’ai senti alors quelque chose qui soulevait toute la salle et, pour la première fois, j’ai compris que j’étais coupable” (138–39; pt. 2, ch. 3). [He said that I had not wanted to see mother, that I had smoked, that I had slept and that I had drunk a white coffee. I then felt something shudder through the whole courtroom and, for the first time, I realised that I was guilty.] By contrast, he finds it reasonable, apparently, that Raymond Sintès should dismiss his involvement in the whole affair leading to the shooting of the Arab as an “accident”: “Le procureur lui a demandé alors comment il se faisait que la lettre qui était à l’origine du drame

avait été écrite par moi. Raymond a répondu que c'était un hasard" (146; pt. 2, ch. 3). [The prosecutor then asked him how it had come about that the letter which had set the whole drama off had been written by me. Raymond replied that it was just an accident.] I propose to show that these contradictions and misapprehensions, this obtuseness and perversity on the part of Meursault in relation to his own guilt, stem from a determining character trait that lends his fragmented and dysfunctional personality an ugly kind of unity: he is fundamentally and consistently misogynistic, and so feels blameworthy vis-à-vis his mother with good reason.

There are three key female characters in the novel: Meursault's mother, his girlfriend, and Sintès's mistress. The first dies, unmourned by her only son; the second is exclusively the object of unsentimental sexual desire; the third is the hapless victim of gratuitous physical violence, and the survivor of her unfortunate brother, shot to death on a beach by our mythical messiah. Nobody ever apologises to any of these women for the treatment they receive, least of all Meursault himself. On the contrary, the extent of his complicity in their neglect, abuse or persecution qualifies him beyond question as a culpable gynophobe. The weight of textual evidence for these claims is overwhelming, so I shall necessarily be selective.

Meursault makes no apology for the fact that he placed "Maman" in a home because she was "bored" living with him—a condition for which he accepts no responsibility, incidentally, nor for the fact that she was thoroughly unhappy when she first moved there: "'Vous êtes jeune et elle devait s'ennuyer avec vous.' C'était vrai. Quand elle était à la maison, maman passait son temps à me suivre des yeux en silence. Dans les premiers jours où elle était à l'asile, elle pleurait souvent" (12; pt. 1, ch. 1). ['You are young and she must have been bored living with you.' It was true. When she was in the house, mother spent her time following me around with her gaze, in silence. During the early days that she was in the old folks' home, she cried often.] Nor does

he regret the infrequency of his visits, which deprived him of his Sundays—“... dans la dernière année je n’y suis presque plus allé. Et aussi parce que cela me prenait mon dimanche—sans compter l’effort pour aller à l’autobus, prendre des tickets et faire deux heures de route” (12; pt. 1, ch. 1) [... during the last year I hardly went there any more. And also because that took up my Sunday—not to mention the effort involved in getting to the bus, buying tickets and travelling for a couple of hours]—a day of the week he did not much like, anyway: “J’ai pensé que c’était dimanche et cela m’a ennuyé: je n’aime pas le dimanche” (36; pt. 1, ch. 2). [I thought ‘it’s Sunday,’ and that annoyed me: I don’t like Sundays.] The critical consensus is to call such attitudes “admirable honesty” on Meursault’s part, but another term for them could be “cold selfishness.” Instances of casual indifference towards his ailing mother are subtly sown throughout the narrative, including his inability to state her age (15), his equivocations in the matter of viewing her corpse (16–19), his frustration at being prevented from going out for a walk (20), and in particular his intuition that her mortal remains “meant nothing” to her surviving colleagues: “J’avais même l’impression que cette morte, couchée au milieu d’eux, ne signifiait rien à leurs yeux. Mais je crois maintenant que c’était une impression fausse” (21; pt. 1, ch. 1). [I even had the impression that this corpse, lying in their midst, meant nothing to them. But I now think that was a false impression.] I suggest that this is a clear case of projection, since the person to whom these remains are meaningless is, of course, Meursault himself.

Admittedly, Meursault would not be the first person in history to have parked his elderly mother in an old folks’ home, neglected her for a while, then felt unmoved by her death. However, the notion that his unfilial indifference is mysteriously “heroic” is surely unique to such circumstances. When the roles are reversed—as they are for Meursault’s young fellow



prison inmate—we find a rare intimation of the kind of mother / son relationship that Meursault might have enjoyed had he but made the requisite effort:

Mon voisin de gauche, un petit jeune homme aux mains fines, ne disait rien. J'ai remarqué qu'il était en face de la petite vieille et que tous les deux se regardaient avec intensité. ... Mon voisin et sa mère se regardaient toujours. ... Le seul îlot de silence était à côté de moi dans ce petit jeune homme et cette vieille qui se regardaient. ... Il a dit: 'Au revoir, maman' et elle a passé sa main entre deux barreaux pour lui faire un petit signe lent et prolongé (117–18; pt. 2, ch. 2).

[My neighbour to the left, a slight young man with delicate hands, said nothing. I noticed that he was opposite a little old lady and that they were both staring at each other. ... My neighbour and his mother were still looking at each other. ... The only island of silence was next to me, in this slight young man and this old woman, watching each other. ... He said: 'Goodbye, mum,' and she slipped her hand through the bars to give him a long, slow little wave.]

Meursault gives us to believe that his own stoic passivity is a quality inherited from (or inculcated by) his mother, suggesting that their resemblance and affinity are crystallised in apathy and indifference: “C’était d’ailleurs une idée de maman, et elle le répétait souvent, qu’on finissait par s’habituer à tout” (120; pt. 2, ch. 2). [Besides, it was one of mother’s ideas, which she often repeated, that in the end one gets used to anything.] Or, again: “Maman disait souvent qu’on n’est jamais tout à fait malheureux. Je l’approuvais dans ma prison, quand ... un nouveau jour glissait dans ma cellule” (172; pt. 2, ch. 5). [Mum often said that one is never completely unhappy. I agreed with her in my prison, when ... the light of a new day crept into my cell.] Yet, what is the content of the *fait divers* that fascinates Meursault in his cell, and later becomes the subject of Camus’s play, *Le Malentendu* [*The Misunderstanding*]? It is the tragic story of indifference between mother and son:

... riche, [cet homme] était revenu ... sa mère tenait un hôtel [... il] était allé chez sa mère qui ne l’avait pas reconnu ... Il avait montré son argent. Dans la nuit, sa mère et sa sœur l’avaient assassiné à coups de marteau pour le voler ... Le matin, [sa] femme était venue, avait révélé sans le savoir l’identité du voyageur. La mère s’était pendue. La sœur s’était jetée dans un puits. J’ai dû lire cette histoire des milliers de fois. D’un côté, elle était

invraisemblable. D'un autre, elle était naturelle. De toute façon, je trouvais que le voyageur l'avait un peu mérité et qu'il ne faut jamais jouer (124–25; pt. 2, ch. 2).

[... wealthy, [this man] had come back ... his mother kept an hotel [...he] had gone there but his mother had not recognised him ... He had shown off his money. In the night, his mother and sister had beaten him to death with a hammer in order to rob him. ... In the morning, [his] wife had come and unwittingly revealed the traveller's identity. The mother had hanged herself. The sister had thrown herself down a well. I must have read this story thousands of times. On the one hand, it was implausible. On the other, it was natural. In any case, I thought that the traveller had deserved it a bit and that we should never play-act.]

Lack of recognition entails lack of feeling: the visitor chooses to play-act—for which Meursault condemns him—and finds death as a consequence. But it is not his innocent charade so much as the insensitivity and avarice of mother and sister (from which his wife, the third woman in the story, is unable to save him) that make his murder not only possible but also ineluctable. Every kind of woman—or all of womankind—is inculpated. Eve, *qua* woman, is the downfall and death of Adam, *qua* man. We are back in the Garden of Eden, and subject to the writ of Old Testament phallocracy and gynophobia: woman, as temptress and instigator of sin, must be punished. Meursault sees to it that she is.

While Meursault's mother was effectively punished by neglect, his girlfriend, Marie—bearing the multivalent biblical name of the iconic virgin, mother and whore—is chastised by an excess of the wrong sort of attention: a kind of subtle sadism, insofar as she is systematically reduced to her corporeal manifestation only, an unmodulated object of desire. When Meursault meets her at the beach, his account stresses the purely physical nature of the encounter:

J'ai retrouvé dans l'eau Marie Cardona, une ancienne dactylo de mon bureau dont j'avais eu envie à l'époque. ... j'ai effleuré ses seins. ... j'ai laissé aller ma tête en arrière et je l'ai posée sur son ventre. ... j'ai passé ma main autour de sa taille ... Elle avait sa jambe contre la mienne. Je lui caressais les seins. Vers la fin de la séance, je l'ai embrassée, mais mal (34–35; pt. 1, ch. 2).

[I bumped into Marie Cardona in the water, previously a secretary at my office whom I had fancied at the time. ... my hand brushed against her breasts. ... I let my head go back and rested it on her belly. ... I put my hand round her waist ... She had her leg against mine. I was stroking her breasts. Towards the end of the session, I kissed her, but clumsily.]

This sets the tone for their relations: Meursault's lust is repeatedly provoked by the strictly sensual aspects of Marie—especially the sight and the feel of her—but he has no interest or understanding for her not untypical enquiries about his *feelings* for her: “Quand elle a ri, j'ai eu encore envie d'elle. Un moment après, elle m'a demandé si je l'aimais. Je lui ai répondu que cela ne voulait rien dire, mais qu'il me semblait que non. Elle a eu l'air triste” (59; pt. 1, ch. 4). [When she laughed, I wanted her again. A moment later, she asked me if I loved her. I replied that that didn't mean anything, but that it seemed to me not. She looked sad.] The same supreme brusqueness characterises his attitude to marriage, normally regarded (with some cause) as indicative of commitment to a relationship:

Le soir, Marie ... m'a demandé si je voulais me marier avec elle. J'ai dit que cela m'était égal et que nous pourrions le faire si elle le voulait. Elle a voulu savoir alors si je l'aimais. J'ai répondu comme je l'avais déjà fait une fois, que cela ne signifiait rien mais que sans doute je ne l'aimais pas. ‘Pourquoi m'épouser alors?’ a-t-elle dit. ... Elle a observé alors que le mariage était une chose grave. J'ai répondu: ‘Non.’ ... Elle voulait simplement savoir si j'aurais accepté la même proposition venant d'une autre femme, à qui je serais attaché de la même façon. J'ai dit: ‘Naturellement.’ ... elle a murmuré que j'étais bizarre, qu'elle m'aimait sans doute à cause de cela mais que peut-être un jour je la dégoûterais pour les mêmes raisons (69–70; pt. 1, ch. 5).

[In the evening, Marie ... asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said it was all the same to me and we could get married if she wanted. Then she wanted to know whether I loved her. I answered as I had done once already, that it didn't mean anything but that I probably didn't love her. ‘Why marry me then?’ she said. ... Then she remarked that marriage was a serious matter. I answered: ‘No’. ... She simply wanted to know if I would have accepted the same proposal made by another woman to whom I might be attached in the same way. I said: ‘Of course’. ... she murmured that I was bizarre, that she loved me probably because of that but that perhaps one day I would disgust her for the same reasons.]

“Bizarre” seems to me a polite understatement in the circumstances, and it comes as no surprise that, on occasions when Marie is visibly upset, our hero makes no move to comfort her: “Mme Masson pleurait et Marie était très pâle. Moi, cela m’ennuyait de leur expliquer. J’ai fini par me taire et j’ai fumé en regardant la mer” (88; pt. 1, ch. 6). [Madame Masson was crying and Marie was very pale. For my part, it bored me to explain everything to them. In the end, I shut up and smoked a cigarette, staring out to sea.] Indeed, it is Meursault’s very reluctance “devant l’effort qu’il fallait faire pour aborder encore les femmes” (91; pt. 1, ch. 6) [faced with the effort required to deal with the women again], his compulsive urge to flee from them, that drives him out onto the beach for a second and fatal rendez-vous with the aggrieved Arab men: “J’avais envie de retrouver le murmure de son eau, envie de fuir le soleil, l’effort et les pleurs de femme, envie enfin de retrouver l’ombre et son repos” (92; pt. 1, ch. 6). [I wanted to rejoin the tinkling water, wanted to flee from the sun, the stress and the tears of the women, wanted in short to find again the restful shade.]

After Meursault’s imprisonment, the merely emblematic status of Marie, *qua* desirable woman, becomes increasingly apparent. When she is forbidden to visit him because she is not his wife, he feels as a consequence more “at home” in his prison cell:

C’est seulement après la première et la seule visite de Marie que tout a commencé. Du jour où j’ai reçu sa lettre (elle me disait qu’on ne lui permettait plus de venir parce qu’elle n’était pas ma femme), de ce jour-là, j’ai senti que j’étais chez moi dans ma cellule et que ma vie s’y arrêta (113; pt. 2, ch. 2).

[It was only after Marie’s first and only visit that everything began. From the day that I received her letter (she was telling me that she was no longer allowed to come because she was not my wife), from that day, I felt at home in my cell and sensed that my life was coming to a stop there.]

This banishment of the female from the male living-space rehearses the expulsion of Meursault’s mother from his apartment, which had also resulted in a reduction of his own living-space, for

comfort's sake: "l'appartement ... était commode quand maman était là. Maintenant il est trop grand pour moi et j'ai dû transporter dans ma chambre la table de la salle à manger" (36; pt. 1, ch. 2). [The flat ... was comfortable when mother was there. Now it is too big for me and I have had to move the dining table into my bedroom.] Such spatial diminution strongly prefigures prison itself, of course, and the theme adumbrates that of the later semi-autobiographical *nouvelle*, "Jonas, ou l'artiste au travail"<sup>6</sup> [Jonas, or the Artist at Work], in which the hero's personal environment is gradually eroded to that of a box, excluding all other company, especially female. Meursault remains susceptible to Marie's sensual attractions, but as insensitive as ever when it comes to articulating any feelings for her: "Je l'ai trouvée belle, mais je n'ai pas su le lui dire" (116; pt. 2, ch. 2). [I found her beautiful, but I didn't know how to tell her.] Catching sight of her in the courtroom, he is struck by the beauty especially of her breasts and her lips (143), yet he does not look for her in the audience, and when their eyes meet his "heart remains closed" and he is "unable even to return her smile" (162). Later on, his supposition that Marie might even be dead leaves him, characteristically, indifferent—just as his own mother's death had done, indeed (175). And why not? Marie, after all—as we learn in the course of Meursault's splenetic and vitriolic final outburst to the prison chaplain—was implicitly worth as much, or as little, as Salamano's dog: "Le chien de Salamano valait autant que sa femme. La petite femme automatique était aussi coupable que la Parisienne que Masson avait épousée ou que Marie qui avait envie que je l'épouse" (184; pt. 2, ch. 5). [Salamano's dog was worth as much as his wife. The little automaton woman was as guilty as the Parisian woman that Masson had married, or as Marie who had wanted me to marry her.] Notice that each of the persons inferentially assimilated here to a scabby old mongrel dog is a woman, and each of them is deemed essentially as guilty as Meursault himself.

Lest the indictment of Meursault as a thoroughgoing misogynist remain unproven, let us consider his treatment of the third key female character, the former mistress of Raymond Sintès. First, note that Sintès is a pimp to whom Camus has—mischievously or perversely, but surely not unwittingly—assigned his beloved mother’s maiden name: as though, perhaps, Sintès were really a madam, a woman who professionally exploits other women? Be that as it may, “Dans le quartier, on dit qu’il vit des femmes” (47; pt. 1, ch. 3). [The word on the street is that he lives off women.] His former mistress, however, has angered him by refusing to “work” for him (even one afternoon per week), contenting herself instead with being “kept.” We have to refer to her in this impersonal manner because—although Sintès tells Meursault her name, which indicates that she is a “Moorish woman” (54)—he does not trouble to record it, so that she remains throughout an anonymous Arabic whore; moreover, one who (in Raymond’s opinion, and with Meursault’s easy assent), having *possibly* been “unfaithful,” *deserves punishment*. Sintès has already beaten her till he drew blood (51), but considers that she is not yet sufficiently chastised—an opinion with which Meursault again readily concurs. He therefore becomes a crucial conspirator in a plot to lure the woman back to Raymond’s apartment, so that she can be ritually abused and humiliated at the hands of this repulsive social parasite. For his part, Meursault obligingly writes the necessary letter of false reconciliation, because he can understand why Sintès should want to punish the woman further—evidently, he has no difficulty in presuming her guilt in the matter—and because he can “see no reason not to satisfy” Sintès: “J’ai fait la lettre. Je l’ai écrite un peu au hasard, mais je me suis appliqué à contenter Raymond parce que je n’avais pas de raison de ne pas le contenter” (54; pt. 1, ch. 3). [I did the letter. I wrote it more or less at random, but I made an effort to please Raymond because I had no reason not to please him.] Finding themselves so like-minded, Raymond and Meursault—now “good mates”—conclude their

evening of eating, drinking, smoking, and plotting a vicious and vindictive attack upon a nameless young Algerian woman, by warmly shaking hands and smugly agreeing that “entre hommes on se comprenait toujours” (55; pt. 1, ch. 3). [Men always understood each other.]

Meursault's disingenuous complicity in this shocking crime does not end there. On the night of the planned assault—his letter having had the desired effect—Meursault stands aside as his newly-made “mate” beats up the ensnared woman, whose screams alert the whole household to the unsavoury scene. Marie is especially appalled, urging Meursault to call the police, which he stubbornly refuses to do: “La femme criait toujours et Raymond frappait toujours. Marie m’a dit que c’était terrible et je n’ai rien répondu. Elle m’a demandé d’aller chercher un agent, mais je lui ai dit que je n’aimais pas les agents” (60; pt. 1, ch. 4). [The woman was still screaming and Raymond was still beating her. Marie told me that this was terrible but I didn’t reply. She asked me to go and get a policeman, but I told her that I didn’t like the police.] This horrible episode of conspiratorial brutality not unnaturally robs Marie of her appetite, whereas it positively whets Meursault's: “Marie et moi avons fini de préparer le déjeuner. Mais elle n’avait pas faim, j’ai presque tout mangé” (61; pt. 1, ch. 4). [Marie and I finished making the meal. But she wasn’t hungry, I ate almost everything.] We are not surprised, then, to find that Raymond and Meursault later on agree that the unhappy victim has been satisfactorily punished, and that this is a “good moment” of veritable male-bonding:

Raymond est entré. ... Je lui ai dit qu’il me semblait que maintenant elle était punie et qu’il devait être content. C’était aussi son avis ... Il m’a dit qu’il fallait que je lui serve de témoin. Moi cela m’était égal ... J’ai accepté ... Je le trouvais très gentil avec moi et j’ai pensé que c’était un bon moment (62–63; pt. 1, ch. 4).

[Raymond came in. ... I told him it seemed to me that now she was punished and he must be pleased about that. That was his opinion too ... He told me that I had to act as his witness. It was all the same to me ... I agreed ... I found him very pleasant towards me and thought that it was a nice moment.]

Meursault therefore compounds his already shameful implication in this contemptible conspiracy by agreeing to stand as Raymond's witness, thus making himself an accomplice *before, during and after* the fact.

In conclusion, far from being innocent and exemplary, Meursault is guilty not only of manslaughter but also of systematic machismo and misogyny. It is noteworthy that the insult that instigates the whole process of retribution is the Arab woman's brother telling Sintès that he is "not a man" (49), and that this comment is ironically echoed by Céleste, testifying for the defence, to the effect that Meursault "is a man," adding that "everybody knows what is meant by that" (141). Yes, Meursault is a man, alright, and of the very worst kind—that is, the kind that gives men a bad name. Manifestly comfortable only in the company of other men, pathetically desirous of their comradeship and approval—Céleste's testimony so touches him that "c'est la première fois de ma vie que j'ai eu envie d'embrasser un homme" (143; pt. 2, ch. 3) [it was the first time in my life that I had wanted to kiss a man], and Masson's testimony harps on the same theme of manliness, "un honnête homme [...] un brave homme" (145; pt. 2, ch. 3) [an honest man ... a fine man]—Meursault is equally *uncomfortable* in the company of women and tends to expel or exclude them from his life, except where they satisfy his sexual drive or his sadistic impulses. In short, Meursault clearly believes that women, when not being avoided altogether, were put on this earth, to use the common anglo-saxon parlance, for shagging or slapping. To speak of him in terms of "mythic hero," "saint" or "messiah," is so much whimsical exaggeration when he is demonstrably an unreconstructed, un-self-aware, unrepentant and apparently incorrigible male chauvinist malcontent.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All translations in this article are my own.

<sup>2</sup> In *Cahiers du Sud*, février 1943, reproduced in Sartre, *Situations I*.

<sup>3</sup> Camus's "Préface à l'édition universitaire américaine"—the very existence of which indicates the canonic status accorded to the text not much more than a decade after its publication—was written in 1955 and published by Methuen, London, in 1958, then reproduced in Camus, *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, 1928–29.

<sup>4</sup> Our Editor has rightly drawn my attention to the opinion of one peer-reviewer that what Camus meant by this claim was that "while Christ [was] the incarnation of God in the age of belief, Meursault is the incarnation of, or reflection of, his age"; and the same colleague expressed doubt that "Camus himself thought that Meursault was some sort of moral hero." That might well be so but, with respect, this objection misses my point. For my part, it is unclear what Camus means by his remark. What would it mean for humanity to "deserve" a Messiah of any kind, whether Jesus or Meursault? And by subverting his own quip with the adverb "paradoxically," what does Camus imply? That we do not really deserve a Messiah at all, or rather that we do not *need* to deserve one in the first place? Or again that Meursault is some sort of counter-Messiah or anti-hero? Or simply that he does not mean what he is saying? To suggest that Meursault "incarnates" or "reflects" his age raises the question: why would he therefore be regarded as an "outsider" in his own time? My point is not to assert that Camus himself wished to hold up Meursault as a moral exemplar—even though he is clearly a "hero of the Absurd," along with Sisyphus, Caligula and Don Juan, and he is unironically characterised as a man who "accepts to die for the truth"—but to illustrate the extent to which, by 1955, Camus had already succumbed to the "mythic hero" syndrome initiated by Sartre in 1943, and resoundingly endorsed by the authoritative conspectus of Morot-Sir in 1996. This moral sanctification of Meursault, which is not generally taken to be paradoxical, remains the critical orthodoxy where this well-known text is concerned, and it is that critical orthodoxy that I am setting out to contest and refute in the present article.

<sup>5</sup> *L'Étranger* was first published by Gallimard, Paris, in 1942, and first appeared in the Collection Folio in 1971. All page references are to the 1998 imprint of the Folio edition.

<sup>6</sup> In Albert Camus, *L'Exil et le royaume*.

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