

Colonialism, Enlightenment, Castration:
Writing, Narration, and Legibility in *L'Etranger*

Larry W. Riggs
Paula Willoquet-Maricondi
Butler University

Camus' *L'Etranger* (1942) has been examined from many critical points of view. In some ways, the most interesting interpretations are those that can be broadly characterized as psychoanalytic. These usually focus on the issues of separation, parricide, and guilt in the novel. What is proposed here is an approach that goes beyond these analyses by combining the issue of what might be called "narratability" with some psychoanalytic insights, focusing first on the key incident in Meursault's story when he involves himself in *writing*. The major "Acts" of Meursault's tragedy are all defined by *writing*: the telegram announcing his mother's death, the letter he writes for Raymond, Marie's letter to him in prison, and the reporters' notes during the trial.

Our analysis also enables us to link another of the novel's underlying themes—fragmentation and colonization of the environment—with our examination of Meursault's movement toward narratability and condemnation. The unbearable intensity of the sun throughout the novel is a token of this fragmentation. *L'Etranger* links writing, judgment, and colonization with fragmentation of the natural environment. The evocation of the funeral establishes this link: Meursault describes the hearse carrying his mother's body as resembling "un plumier" 'an inkwell' (25); he sees the other people at the wake as judges; the European-style ceremonial dress of the participants in the funeral put them at odds with the desert setting.¹ Colonial culture places persons in conflict with their environment.

The world wherein the story unfolds is obviously a colonial one. Raymond Sintès' relationship with his Arab mistress is a small-scale reproduction of colonial Algeria, as is, perhaps, old Salamano's relationship with his dog. It is also, then, both a major literal cause of Meursault's fate and a symbol for the entire complex of "causes" at work in Algeria. As Jean Gassin has it: "Dans *L'Etranger*, les rapports

vrais entre Français et Arabes sont exactement dépeints. . . ." 'In *L'Etranger*, the true relations between French and Arabs are accurately portrayed' ("Camus Raciste?" 278). Meursault's story, which begins in earnest with the letter he writes for Raymond to the latter's mistress, recounts his recruitment as both a subject and an object of colonization. Indeed, it seals his conscription into the world of subject/object relations in general. Meursault becomes a self capable of narration as he discovers and participates in power as the principle of relationships in this modern, colonial world. Camus makes clear, in *L'Etranger*, the way in which inquiry and explanation, whose original purpose was to neutralize the irresistible power of fate, have become modern equivalents of fate. Narrative is the representation of time and character in terms of causality. As an object of judgment and as a character in a novel, Meursault will be the creature of such representation.

To become capable of narrating is both to become a colonist and to be colonized. It requires a subject/object relationship *within* the self. Becoming a subject capable of narrating one's life is also becoming an individual who behaves and understands in ways that lend themselves to being *read*. Meursault will wind up as the criminal whose act legitimates the administrative and judicial institutions that rule Algeria and condemn him.

Creating conflict and recruiting individuals into "historical" conflicts are keys to social, cultural, and political differentiation and organization. Meursault's story is, from the beginning, one of self-awareness arising from fragmentation, conflict, and guilt. The death of Meursault's mother is followed immediately by an incident in which he experiences the crushing power of the sun. His drowsiness on the way to and during the funeral is largely an effect of the sun's overwhelming strength. Throughout the story, the sun is associated with oppressive weight and with cutting instruments (Andrienne 167-69). It symbolizes both illumination and reduction, or the essence of modern Western "knowledge" (Hall 37).

To structure nature into a hierarchy of literal and symbolic functions is to organize and hierarchize persons, activities, beliefs, and knowledge. The initial fragmentation of nature into separate entities with separate symbolic meanings inaugurates this process. René Andrienne emphasizes that "sur la nature, l'action du soleil n'est pas moins oppressante que sur les hommes" 'the sun's effects are no less oppressive on nature than on men' (166-67). The "cosmic parents"—

sun and sea—are sundered, leaving man in an inadvertently self-imposed exile and inaugurating an endless, self-defeating effort to return to the “source.”

The creation and perpetuation of power is the purpose which this process is designed to accomplish, and power over nature is a disposition of the real and symbolic environments that is convenient to the powerful (Lewis 69). Power over the environment is also fundamentally a function of what is suppressed. Creation of a fragmented world depends on the primordial suppression of unity. Understanding, the assignment of meaning, depends on fragmenting the world—tearing it apart—in order to reconstitute it with culturally, ideologically, defined linkages. As Julia Kristeva has it, interpretation—the assignment of meaning—is always an act of violence (Gallop 27). Unfortunately, as Edward T. Hall puts it, our civilization has emphasized fragmentation and analysis at the expense of our brain’s integrative functions (9).

Meursault inscribes himself within a course of events and a narrative—as well as within a colonized world—by serving as a conduit for *another’s* desire and hatred. His “autonomy” and responsibility are derivative. He is colonized as he takes his position among the colonizers. The writing is the sign of initiation into the symbolic order, the order defined by another’s disposition of symbols and, consequently, of a fragmented world’s elements. He becomes the instrument that reproduces a separation of which he is and will be the victim. He is colonized by colonialism, and by the symbolic disposition of the world inherent in French culture in Algeria, as he allows a particular colonialist to make use of his skill with language. The violent, alienated style of Raymond’s relations with his mistress replaces definitively the unity of mother and child, of person and environment.

Writing As *Con-scription*: Initiation, Individuation, Castration

There are a number of ways in which Meursault’s composition of the letter for Raymond Sintès connects with contemporary literary and psychoanalytic theories about language and, particularly, about writing. Meursault inadvertently takes his place—literally *inscribes* himself—in a conflictual drama (which thereby becomes *his* drama) when he associates himself with Raymond in the latter’s dispute with his Arab mistress. At the trial, the prosecutor speaks of the letter as

being "à l'origine du drame" 'at the origin of the drama' (146). It is out of this conflict that the narrative of Meursault's "fate" develops. The writing of the letter prefigures both Meursault's (equally inadvertent) later taking up of the gun with which he will kill an Arab and his inexorable evolution toward a situation that makes him capable of writing the narrative the reader reads. It seals his birth into language.

The night of initiation during which Meursault writes the letter is a watershed in the development of both his life and his consciousness. He is initiated into narrative consciousness by the same act that involves him in the events that will be narrated. He thereby begins to become the self that will be capable of writing the story. Writing makes him a differentiated, conscious self with an individual, tragic fate. His destiny will be that of a writer, as well as that of an ordinary individual and of a character in a novel.

As he takes up the pen, which is certainly an instrument of power, Meursault "stands in for the father": he allies himself with the male Raymond *vis à vis* the feminized "Mauresque" woman, and with the French position in relation to Arab Algeria. Inadvertently—and it is important to emphasize the *passivity* with which Meursault approaches this *act*—he becomes the instrument, but also in a sense the subject, of violence toward the Arab woman and toward the feminized Arabs in general. Meursault says of the letter that "je l'ai écrite un peu au hasard" 'I wrote it without giving it much thought' (54).

In a real sense, writing the letter is a gesture that involves Meursault in reproducing and legitimating the violent separation of Algeria into Arab and French poles. Raymond's choice of Meursault as *porte-parole* or scribe both informs the reader that Meursault has some skill as a writer and inaugurates the latter's inexorable "climb," or fall, to narrative consciousness about his life. This incident also may be related to Camus' own experience of writing *in* and *as* French. As Camus says in his *Essais*: writing is "un déchirement perpétuellement renouvelé . . ." 'a perpetually repeated sundering' (1090). If we take *L'Étranger* as it is presented—as a hypothetical first-person narrative—then it can have been written only in the interval between condemnation and execution. We will argue here that Camus presents individuality in our civilization, and particularly the writer's individuality, as the *aftermath* of a predetermined crime.

Further analysis along these lines discloses more of this incident's importance as a focus of meanings for the novel. Until this night with Raymond, Meursault has conspicuously refused any place in a "ratio-

nal," "progressive" narrative or biography. He is not married; he frustrates his boss by refusing to desire advancement in his career; love is of no interest to him; he does not participate in the ceremonies of ritualized grief; he does not even find Paris attractive. Meursault does not experience the needs and desires called for by the current social norms. He does not pursue fragmentary and fragmenting objects and "satisfactions." His pleasure in Marie and in the unity of sun and sea, and his intense thirst on the fatal day, are the only experiences of strong pleasure and desire that he recounts.

In a sense, of course, Meursault will be tried and convicted for pleasure: acquiring a mistress and seeing a Fernandel film are not among the approved activities of one whose mother has just died. So, Meursault must be "digested" into a different but equally comprehensive story: that of the criminally heartless pleasure-seeker.

Meursault's failure to cry at his mother's funeral is perceived as a withholding of what is due. He does not lend his body and its functions, in this case his tears, as pen, ink, and paper for the ritual repetition and legitimation of the code. Ceremoniousness emphasizes that the code is, precisely, a culture's repetition to itself of the stories or myths whose message is the culture's uniquely legitimate claim to true understanding. Reality must be made to "recite" the Law. Individual lives must produce only recognizable dramatized copies of society's accepted stories. The "individuality" of a particular destiny is merely a kind of rhetorical device.

Heretofore, Meursault has truly appeared as an *étranger* 'outsider'; he does not perform in a way that expresses desire for integration into the social system or complements others' performances in the ritual reproduction of the governing social ideology. Indeed, *this* is what he will be judicially condemned for. Clearly, his mother's death has inaugurated a concentration of pressures toward conformity, but until he writes the letter, Meursault remains socially "indigestible." He does not fall within the norm of autonomy, the norm of the self as a progressive narrative, characteristic of cultures that take themselves to be "advanced" (Heller and Wellbery 8-11). As Michel de Certeau has said, modernity is *writing* (168). Writing is prediction and control. It is also separation and isolation.

As it is recounted, the writing of the fateful letter is both Meursault's self-inscription in the ideologically and physically divided world and a profound challenge to ordinary understanding of how one becomes a subject. Special competence in a language, and particularly compe-

tence as a writer, is regarded in Western culture as conferring authority. Meursault thus acquires a certain authoritativeness and responsibility as he inadvertently becomes Raymond's ally and the ally of colonialism. Writing the letter is of a kind with firing the gun. In both acts, Meursault stands-in for another and adopts a violently dominant position. He both confirms the cultural/ideological *status quo* and violates its laws. He makes *marks* that determine the course of his story or the meaning that will be read into his life.

Meursault takes his place in a causal chain by writing the letter, but he is writing *another's* message. This message is the expression of another's aggression and desire. Thus, in terms of Jacques Lacan's style of psychoanalysis, Meursault becomes a "subject" by taking up language as a means of expressing desire and aggression. However, he is actually only serving as a conduit for another's desire. To use language, and particularly to write, is to be colonized by an alien "voice." The subject is always an instrument. Meursault functions, in his personal "fate," as a scribe, reproducing a message passed to him by another. However, what he reproduces is also the inscription of his own destiny. As far as Meursault is concerned, the trial will, in effect, be the definitive utterance of the discourse within whose terms Meursault already inscribes himself when he writes the letter. This colonization by another "voice" reaches its extreme when Meursault evokes the experience of hearing his lawyer speak about the murder in the first person (159).

The letter is, too, a perfect example of what we have learned to call the "flight of the signifier": it is a linguistic product whose ultimate provenance is lost in an infinite regress, and whose eventual effects and meaning are far beyond its "author's" control. Raymond, a symbolic father-initiator, is himself merely the creature of a certain division of the social world. He is no more the "ultimate" source of what the letter expresses than Meursault. However, Raymond *takes himself* to be the originating subject of his acts, even as he merely passes on the social pattern. This is a mistake Meursault will steadfastly refuse to make.

As Meursault acquires a role, a narrative position, and thus a "fate," that fate makes him a co-performer in the colonial drama. He becomes the colonial administration's "partner" as he becomes Raymond's ally. Colonization appears, then, on two levels here: there is the obvious, literal colonization of Algeria with its native population and even its landscape by the French; there is also "colonization"

in the form of others' presence *within* the acts whereby individuals "make" their individuality. Once Meursault allows himself to be involved in Raymond's conflict, he cannot escape the pattern of self-perpetuating rituals that is civilization in "French" Algeria. Not only is he the object of this "game," but his criminal—and apparently autonomous—act provides both pretext and legitimacy for the process that will destroy him as it becomes the narrative and the "meaning" of his life. Like Raymond, the judicial system speaks in terms of rules and legitimacy but, in the end, possesses only violence. Raymond beats his mistress, he says, in order to *punish* her (52).

It makes perfect sense, then, that the evening with Raymond is recounted in terms suggesting that it functions as a ceremony of initiation (47-56). On the night of the letter, Meursault and Raymond eat *boudin*—blood sausage—and drink wine. Raymond also says that he has beaten the woman "jusqu'au sang" 'until she bled' (51). It is clear that this is a *blood* ritual. After Meursault has written the letter, Raymond begins to *tutoyer* him 'address him in the familiar form'. Meursault does not object to this. He acquiesces—passively, as usual—in Raymond's implication that a bond has been formed.

This night of initiation consummates Meursault's colonization by, and entry into, the male, or, more properly, masculine style of subjectivity. Several times during the course of their conversation, Raymond emphasizes that they are men, and that they are going to be "copains" 'pals'. After the letter is written, Raymond says that men always understand one another (55). The letter expresses a violently hostile attitude toward the Arab woman. Meursault already knows that Raymond has beaten her bloody. He has even heard that Raymond "vit des femmes" 'lives off women' (47). If so, Raymond lives off women—Arab women—as the colonists live off Algeria. The writing of the letter can thus be seen as consummating the separation from the female and the destruction of unity inaugurated by the death of Meursault's mother. Her death is turning out to be both the literal death of a particular person and the end of a kind of relation to the world. It also begins the fragmentation of nature and the quest for reintegration which become more important themes as the story unfolds.

Meursault is pressured to take a narrative perspective on his own life. The *Juge d'instruction* 'investigating judge' expects Meursault to demonstrate this kind of awareness by acknowledging a need for Christ's redemption. The *Juge* exclaims that believing all men believe

in God is what gives meaning to *his* life. Meursault's unbelief is thus explicitly made a threat to meaning, and this is another attempt to assimilate him into a system of self-reinforcing ideological assumptions.

If it is true, as John Freccero asserts, that there is a "male" or masculine form of narrative and particularly of autobiography, and if that sort of narrative emphasizes conflict, separation, and linear development, then Meursault becomes a male narrator as he becomes a male subject. He will be unable, finally, to refuse completely the stance of transcendental subjectivity that characterizes traditional autobiography and narrative as well as "normal" personality development.

In fact, of course, male individuation in most cultures involves emphatic separation from all that is female. This separation is often consummated in a night of bloody initiation—as with Raymond's blood sausage and wine. Thus, Meursault's ability to tell his story as a first-person narrative appears to be a function of this brutal, but for him inadvertent and unwelcome, differentiation. He becomes a fully individuated male as he becomes a *writer*. He thereby enters into the *déchirement* (sundering) of which Camus spoke. Moreover, Meursault's role as a French colonialist male will be consummated by the murder.

As he takes up the pen—perhaps inevitably in order to express another's desire and hatred—he becomes the creature of the writing tool he has taken up, and his life begins to acquire a fateful order that will permit its linear narration. In the broadest sense, of course, the "tool," which is also a weapon, is language itself—in Meursault's and Camus' case French, which in Algeria is the language of separation or *déchirement* in its colonialist form. The use of any tool always requires performance of a quasi-ritual behavior. The tool-user is processed by the tool. In the case of writing, one is obliged to specialize in reproducing the entire world inherent in a language and culture.

When he writes the letter, Meursault places himself in a story, or a tradition of stories, as old as the violent overthrow of earth goddesses by sky gods (Ruether). He is conscripted—drafted—into the discourse that tirelessly articulates tasks and roles whose purpose is repetition. Some of these tasks are, of necessity, crimes. The discourse rejects stories it does not already contain. Ultimately, then, the power that destroys Meursault is the same as the one that beats the "Mauresque" woman, or Salamano's dog. The body—most dramatically and definitively Meursault's body—is both the page on which the

copies of dominant stories are written and the writing implement.

There is a link between the “empowerment” of a writer, as Camus evokes it for us, and the psychoanalytic concept of castration. Stephen Ohayon has said that the “theme of solar castration” (194) is strong in the novel. We usually think of writing as expressing one’s uniqueness. In fact, however, as Meursault writes, and as he shoots, he is leaving the traces that will replace him, that will permit his reduction to legibility. These are the gestures that will justify his transportation into the space of judgment, and of narrative; they will allow his conversion into a *case*. During the trial, when Meursault has the urge to speak, his lawyer will say “Taisez-vous” ‘Be quiet’ (151). Meursault feels that “Tout se déroulait sans mon intervention” ‘Everything was happening without my participation’ (151). He is silenced, manipulated—castrated.

Meursault’s ultimate fate—decapitation—will certainly be the ultimate castration. Progressive narration is a struggle to achieve *separation*. To succeed in this struggle is to be marked; to be distinguished is to be torn, to inscribe oneself in a system of symbols and subject/object relations, and also to be a surface which is *written upon*. This passage prepares us to see Meursault’s story as a profound challenge to the myth of individual autonomy—even the autonomy of the writer. “Mastery” of language (and this is Western civilization’s most admired kind of mastery) is seen here as conferring something quite other than autonomy. Camus, like Lacan, suggests that it is through “mastery” of language that the “subject” comes into existence as yearning for something with which to fill a lack, or void. The break with the mother, and more generally with the female or feminine, that inaugurates the “narratable” existence of an “autonomous” individual is both factitious and fictitious, even as it is real: that is, it is only by a kind of trick that the individual appears to have, or to desire, autonomy.

Like any member of a culture, Meursault is an unwitting initiate, or recruit. His most fateful “act” is simply to become a substitute, a stand-in. He stands in for Raymond when he writes the letter, and also when he shoots the Arab. During the trial, the court, in effect, makes him a stand-in for a parricide. This substitution emphasizes the fundamental interchangeability of individuals in modern societies, their ineluctable status as tokens in a comprehensive system of exchange. The use of writing is an initiation into another’s disposition of symbols and relations—a *de facto* colonization. It is also entry into

the world of semiotic exchange. The guillotine will convert Meursault's body into a *sign*, making it an object processed by a discourse and placed in the museum of approved meanings. Individuality is reduced to equivalence. Even crimes (and certainly bodies) have their significance assigned to them by the administration, and that significance can be altered at the administration's convenience.

So, writing the letter makes Meursault a participant in the fractured worlds of language, of symbolic manipulation and fragmented nature, and of colonialism. It is the event that "officially" launches the inexorable process whereby Meursault will ultimately appear to have what might be called a "social Oedipus complex" and to be a parricide. The process Meursault undergoes is strikingly like that described by Freud in *The Future of an Illusion* (38-42). This social Oedipus complex must be *provoked* in the child in order for the Law to function; it must be inculcated in each individual for the Law to be effective (see Poster 34-35). Moreover, it must exist in *identical form* in all individuals.

The Law has need of Crime—"sin is pleasing to God" (Freud 38); the threat of parricide must exist to legitimate the exactions of civilized life. Meursault's case will be explicitly linked to that of the parricide so that he can be seen to have acted *as if* he had had an Oedipus complex. It is the supposed desire to transgress the Law—to kill the father—that creates the individual as a threat to the social order as it makes him an individual. He is constituted as needing-to-be-controlled. The interchangeability, from the court's point of view, of Meursault and another criminal emphasizes the fact that uniqueness is an illusion; the individual, even or especially the criminal, is a signifier to which the ruling culture or ideology assigns meaning as it will. Meursault will be described by the Prosecutor as "un gouffre où la société peut succomber" 'an abyss into which society could sink' (155). He is both manipulated as an unspeaking object and inflated and generalized into a symbolic bogeyman.

In a very real sense, Meursault will only *appear* to be the subject of the murder, just as he is only problematically the writer of the letter. The murder, like the letter, consummates another's violent hatred and reproduces an ideologically defined situation wherein violent hatred is indispensable as justification and perpetuation of an administration. The individual must *appear* to be the autonomous subject of criminal desire if Law is to appear both a necessary and a just control and sanction.

Violent confrontation across a rupture in the world's unity now defines Meursault's relations with the Arabs, the court, and the sun. He and the Arabs are antagonists because the organization—the writing—of thought and space in Algeria makes them antagonists. The "Algeria" he and the Arabs live in is a culturally, ideologically synthesized space. The landscape is composed of "mineralized" fears, lusts, and alibis.

Suppression of the female (or of the feminine), was necessary in order to inaugurate the differentiation Meursault experiences. With their names, customs, costumes, and power, the French have imposed another "Algeria": they have written over the original Algeria as if it were merely a blank page. This new place is one where unity is impossible. The French inhabit their own fears, desires, and rationalizations. The Arabs are reduced to silence, or feminized. They have no names and they do not speak. They certainly do not write, although they too must inhabit the written-over Algeria.

Enlightenment's Central Subject and Totalizing Eye: The Hypertrophic Sun

It is useful to see the sun as the symbol of the symbolic and as the model for enforcement of hierarchical relations. The idea that nature is a political order, with the sun at the "top," sets up "nature" as a confirming reflection of the human political order. If the natural elements can be fragmented and opposed to one another, with the sun above and the "feminine" ocean below, and if, indeed, they are seen as inherently so fragmented and hierarchized, then it appears necessary and appropriate that the same be done with people. Moreover, the "integration" of natural "elements" into a coherent symbolic system legitimates the order claiming to reflect and be reflected by the symbolic integration. The sun therefore functions here in a way that recalls Louis Althusser's mythical "central subject" (170) which is constituted by the pretense that an ideology is organized around a central truth: the sun is both *a* symbol and *the* symbol of symbolization, both a truth and the keystone of Truth. It is the capstone of a hierarchy and the "proof" that that hierarchy is "true."

The fateful privileging of the masculine, or of separation, is shown by Camus to be fundamental in the fragmented, fate-ridden world Meursault must inhabit. Having perceived the importance of this letter, we can better appreciate Camus' presentation of the tragic

process, one of whose central elements turns out to be *writing*, in its broadest sense.

Colonialism is a regime of supposedly transcendental positions and generalizations. It functions as a system of writing—a language. The Arabs have no names because they exist in colonial Algeria only as a dark and threatening generality; they are background material. They exist to justify the tautologies that the colonialist authorities repeat to themselves. Even Meursault's crime is converted from one against an individual and an Arab into one against the *French* authority system and customs. The Arabs embody the mythical lazy, uncivilized "African" (Pratt) who, along with the "hostile" natural environment, justifies—even seems to call for—the colonial culture's transforming presence. It is into *this* language that Meursault will be conscripted.

From the beginning, when Meursault receives the news of his mother's death by telegram and when he is crushed by the sun while walking along the paved road with the funeral party, the issues of writing and spatial inscription are fundamental. The body of the world is written on, as are the bodies of persons. Living beings thus become signs, serving as the medium in which the dominant ideology reiterates itself. Meursault's "acquisition" of a coherent identity and an "individual" fate is really just the use of his life to repeat an old "story." Asphalt is a kind of ink, an instrument of fragmentation, and an organizing medium. As such, it is part of the novel's exploration of *marking*, as are the knife, fists, bullets, blood, judgment, guillotine, and literal writing that figure so prominently in the story.

Already in the beginning, Camus suggests the absence of "escape routes" (Lyotard 8) in this comprehensively written-upon environment. The Law seizes bodies in order to make them its "text" (de Certeau 139). The sun is like the lamp that lights the surface being written upon. It is specifically the mother's funeral that focuses the sun's intensity and makes it oppressive. This will be an even stronger theme during the trial than at the funeral. It is important to emphasize that this funeral is a ceremony, and a French/Catholic-style ceremony. Everyone wears black. No concessions are made to the physical facts of the Algerian environment. Catholic symbolism and ceremony have been transported into this environment wherein they are experienced as uncomfortable self-sacrifices. The same will be true at the trial: there, too, the principals and the spectators will be oppressed by the sun's heat, which is exaggerated by their clothing. The exercise of a

mutilating, killing power is disguised as self-abnegation.

The colonialists' tendency to experience their presence in Algeria as both a necessary "civilizing" influence and a noble self-sacrifice on their part is legitimated and perpetuated by this refusal to adapt their costumes and ceremonies to the environment. The semiotics of their dress and behavior constantly emphasize their separation from nature. Indeed, nature appears hostile to their culture. Their rapacity—their own "primitive" urges—is hidden by their status as national heroes of self-sacrifice, battling with a "harsh" nature and a "primitive" people. Asking for the death-penalty, according to the Prosecutor, is a "pénible devoir" 'painful duty' (157). Mastery disguised as self-sacrifice—power exercised "on behalf" of others or of noble principles—is a key element in any colonialist ideology.

Moreover, with the conversion of nature into a stage-set for the display of human activity, the sun truly becomes the source of illumination for a performance destined to be *judged*. We find Meursault already beginning to experience others as judges during the wake. The blinding, inescapable white light of the lamps in the white-washed room where the wake is held prefigures the sun's oppressive omnipresence in the rest of the story. When he is questioned by the *Juge d'instruction*, the latter sits in shadow, while Meursault is fully and intensely illuminated by a lamp (100). So, the sun is the keystone of many symbolic systems—Camus at least once explicitly identified it with Catholicism (Ohayon 192)—and its power is intensified when it is split-off from the rest of nature in order to make it the essential image of power and hierarchy. Under its light, *presence is guilt*.

The oppressive sun represents the hypertrophy of vision that characterizes modern Western civilization. The sun, then, is a "totalizing eye," penetrating and eliminating murky, mysterious spaces and illuminating individual idiosyncrasies for judgment. It is a structural analogue of both centralized political authority and "panoptical" science. Global illumination from a single center serves both knowledge and power. Whether we emphasize Costes' idea that the sun is a kind of super-ego or see it as a more traditional sky-god, it is connected with hierarchy and the Law, and thus with guilt. The sun of judgment and knowledge is the modern, comprehensively planned and administered society's insistence on universal transparency. It refuses to acknowledge any unknown, unknowable reality. Things become real only as they are illuminated by the totalizing eye of "knowledge" and Law.

Meursault's mother's death and funeral inaugurate his yearning for the "lost paradise of complete fusion with the all" (Muller and Richardson 22). The sun figures man's authority over nature. This power over nature is basic to Western ethics. At the same time, it serves as the model for authority of man over man. The sun is a father-symbol, and its growing strength in *L'Étranger* emphasizes the loss of the balancing motherly influence and the inexorable isolation of the "individual."

This sun-symbolism can be seen as a model for would-be transcendental subjects (see, for a related point, Bennett 116). In this case, the individual who tries—or is led—to experience the self as a central, transcendental subject is both the sun's imitator and its *rival*. Thus, too, does the child become the father's rival at the moment when he would imitate the father. Meursault imitates the sun, or the father, by participating in Raymond's violence against the Arab woman and by killing the Arab man—by taking, in effect, a dominant position. This dominance is, of course, both inadvertent and illusory. The sun oppresses him, moves him toward the act that will permit definitive condemnation, and fixes and illuminates him as visible to judgment. He is fuel for the operation of a "mécanisme implacable" 'implacable mechanism' (165).

At his trial, Meursault will explain his act by saying it was "à cause du soleil" 'because of the sun' (158). He thus redirects our attention to the fact that his "autonomy," and therefore his responsibility, are derived from the predisposition of the psyche by its constituting symbolism. In other words, he and Camus challenge us to see autonomy within the prevailing model as both mythical and fundamentally unjust. Meursault refuses to cooperate in perpetuating this autonomy-myth, though he will nonetheless be made by the trial to *appear* as a confirmation of it. Camus portrays the "autonomous," individualized self as brought into being in order to be condemned, and in order to confirm by his crime that the established order is both necessary and just. Camus calls Meursault, in the preface to the American edition of the novel, "the only Christ we deserve." Our Law has become so comprehensive and so intolerant of deviation or extraordinariness that we only become functional "individuals" by crucifying or castrating individuality. The Investigating Judge calls Meursault "Monsieur l'Antéchrist" 'Mister Antichrist' (111). This is clearly part of his job, which is to reduce Meursault and his act to comprehensibility within the terms of a set of categories.

Meursault will say that he hopes to encounter a howling crowd at his execution, "pour que tout soit consommé" 'so that everything may be consummated'. It has been noted that this echoes the "consummatum est" attributed to Christ (Ohayon 201). It has not been emphasized, however, that, from the beginning, Camus is preparing us to see Meursault as Christlike in the sense that he is brought into being as a subject in order to be executed. Like all differentiated, "narratable" selves, he is destined for guilt. His story, like those of all narrated "characters," begins with its ending. His fragmented relationship with a mutilated internal and external nature will appear to ratify the fundamentally tautological Law. Visibility will increasingly mean condemnation for Meursault. As language and action *pass through him* he becomes guilty of an *inherited* crime. The sun of judgment is also the sun of the "Enlightenment" (de Certeau 23-24), which seeks out and destroys unilluminated, private, idiosyncratic, non-narrative spaces and makes this universal transparency the medium of power justified as "knowledge."

This conflict with the sun, into which Meursault is initiated by a ceremony, is the literal and symbolic beginning of the conflict with authority—the "parricide"—which will become his crime and the definition of his individuality without ever having been *his* at all. It seems that the subject can exist only as *the one who is guilty*, and narration can only issue from one who has experienced the passage into guilt. Both nature and the individual are appropriated by a symbolic system operating relentlessly to create and perpetuate a particular civilization's "necessity." Wild, "southern" Algeria (Pratt) "requires" the French civilizing influence. Wild Algeria is inarticulate and unorganized. Similarly, Meursault's interest, immediately after the funeral, in sex, laughter, and the fusion of sun and sea will identify him with the subversive "pleasure principle." He will provide the pretext for a demonstration of authority's power and of its necessity. It is only within an already fragmented world that pleasure can be defined as destructive. The loathing of pleasure built into many social rituals and forms (Horkheimer and Adorno 31) is a powerful force for social cohesion, and also for hierarchy and coercion. Meursault's "parricide" is simply the preference for real pleasure over observing the appearances of formalized grief. He spontaneously, fatally, resists the "disenchantment of the world" (Horkheimer and Adorno 5), which substitutes formula and ritual for felt experience.

We find that Meursault resembles Racine's Phèdre: like Phèdre,

he is immobilized by the sun of judgment. He is an individual bound and bounded by the acts and beliefs of previous generations. In Racine's play, the sun—connected with Phèdre's father, Minos, and her grandfather, Helios—represents the deadening, constricting power of preceding generations. Like Meursault's, Phèdre's "crime" confirms her inclusion in a story whose form and meaning her "individual" destiny can only reproduce. Both stories are thus profound challenges to the concept of autonomy when they are seen as recounting ritual repetitions that have been disguised as individual destinies.

This is precisely the kind of process Meursault finds himself involved in, but Camus also challenges our readerly tendency to demand such a process and to see it as truly "progressive." This is, no doubt, why he "gives" us a narrative that is patently impossible. Combined with the idea that separation from the female is the essence of male individuation (Greenblatt 51), Freccero's concept of a fundamentally conflictual, male type of narrative is useful in preparing us to deepen our understanding of Meursault. It should be recalled at this point that refusal to participate in the narrative-building rituals of the society around him had been Meursault's pattern until the composition of the letter. Through the process inaugurated by the letter, Meursault simply takes his place in a chain(gang?) of signifiers which leads to its own consummation in the final ritual of judgment and condemnation. He is caught in a circuit where the messages have already been composed and sent.

The individual, like Meursault, is both the instrument and the victim of this civilization based on fragmentation and guilt. His obedience reproduces the approved patterns, and his disobedience provides pretexts and justifications for public, ceremonial shows of efficient force. The individual is thus the material from which a particular social formation is made, the tool that does the making, and the threat that makes the formation appear necessary. The spectators in court and, prospectively, at the execution, are the manipulated, passive "collectivity" brought into being and preserved by fear of the "outsider." Camus joins Kafka in suggesting that the individual person is the medium—the flesh, as is literally the case in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"—in which the Law is inscribed and reproduced, a "cockroach" caught permanently in the light of judgment. Even Meursault's efforts to find his way back to unity—to the source—are steps toward his definitive fragmentation by the guillotine. The guillotine will consummate physically what language has already achieved

psychologically and symbolically.

The "sun" of judgment pretends to achieve universal transparency; it actually constitutes the characters whose "truth" it pretends to reveal. It symbolizes, in *L'Etranger*, something much like the disciplinary "knowledge" evoked by Michel Foucault in *Surveiller et punir*. The judgment and sentence imposed on Meursault require developing and publicizing a theory which not only "explains" Meursault's acts and psychology, but also reiterates the necessity and legitimacy of the judgment-ritual itself. Presumably, any members of the social group not persuaded by the theory will be terrorized by the execution. The powerful, panoptical illumination that dominates the story is a kind of enlightenment. The Enlightenment itself emanated from the conviction that knowledge could eliminate surprise and fear. Enclosure of the formerly wild outsider within the light of a domesticating explanation exorcizes individuals' fear of their own "wild" potential and dramatizes reduction of the individual to the illustrative, the schematic.

Character/Criminal: Legibility as Decapitation

What is free—"wild" may be a useful synonym for "free" here—does not write (de Certeau 155). It leaves no permanent traces, creates no text. This means, of course, that what is free or wild cannot be *read*. We have shown that Meursault's becoming a narrator or writer is important. Equally important is the fact that this process is also a becoming *legible*. In his arguments to the court, Meursault's lawyer says that he has *read* Meursault's soul (159). The prosecutor makes essentially the same claim, linking coherent legibility with certitude: "J'ai retracé devant vous le fil d'événements qui a conduit cet homme à tuer. . . ." 'I have retraced for you the series of events that brought this man to kill' (153). Initiation into subject-object relations is also conscription into the belief that illuminating the object proves the subject's superiority. Every reduction of experience to a "subject's" comprehension of an "object" is a decapitation.

Meursault's story is an "allegory" of becoming legible in two ways, of course: he is both an example of individuation in a real cultural situation and a character in a novel. Reading always requires a code. As both character and hypothetical "real" person, Meursault exemplifies the processes whereby an individual comes into, or is reduced to, legibility or commensurability with a code. Both the

judicial process and the narrative itself—like all forms of “logic”—reflect the assumption that the subject-object hierarchy is the essence of all relationships. To be legible is to exist as a reproduction and ratification of the code. Trials and traditional novels define an individual—character or criminal—as that which can be understood and elucidated by the judicial or novelistic code. Here we return to the theme of Meursault as originally an “indigestible” outsider—*étranger*—domesticated and reduced to exchangeability within the prevailing marketplace of signs and meanings. His *existence* as an experiencing being must be marginalized and eliminated in this process.

Examining Meursault’s “deviant” behavior at the funeral and throughout the story in terms of its relationship with the code of social norms makes us aware of the powerful presence of *ceremonies* in the novel. From the funeral to the trial, and punctuated by the “initiation” at Raymond’s home and the “processing” by the judicial system, Meursault is converted gradually into grist for the ceremonial mill. His execution will simply be the final ritual reduction of his body and his person. The ceremonies, like all such rituals, reiterate and reinforce the social code. The *asile* (convalescent home) prefigures the courtroom, and both are paradigms of the society. Meursault clearly understands this aspect of his “story,” for he wishes for a large crowd at the execution.

From the beginning, Meursault’s story is that of an individual who is more difficult than most to read. Because he is not comprehensible—legible—as a conventional son, employee, or lover, he must become the central figure in a different story: that of the parricide. The individual who might exist outside the Law is recuperated as the one who would *overthrow* the Law. This replaces him within the Law’s purview and prevents any spread of the idea that the Law is not universal. The “outlaw” thus becomes the monstrous Other, who is actually constituted or “secreted” by the system. His story is then that of the prodigal and outlaw whose crime and whose fate condense and generalize guilt, making the society’s members distrust both external and internal “nature”—both others and themselves, both environment and psyche.

As far as the judicial system is concerned, Meursault’s story’s most important function is to reiterate the ideological principle that the State is the master reader of signs and legislator of meanings. The administration, social avatar of the sun, is the central subject. All must finally be comprehended within the ruling *coherence*. The individual

is thus seen as “writing” his life, but as not being capable or worthy of fully understanding it. I “write” my story; the authorities prove their legitimate superiority by reading-out its true meaning to me—or beyond me to a *public*. This is precisely what Meursault evokes when he describes the experience of hearing his lawyer speak of his, Meursault’s, acts in the first person: “A un moment donné, cependant, je l’ai écouté parce qu’il disait: ‘Il est vrai que j’ai tué.’ Puis il a continué sur ce ton, disant ‘je’ chaque fois qu’il parlait de moi. . . . Moi, j’ai pensé que c’était m’écarter encore de l’affaire, me réduire à zéro et, en un certain sens, se substituer à moi” ‘At a certain moment, however, I listened to him because he was saying It is true that I killed. “Then he continued in that way, saying ‘I’ each time he spoke of me. . . . I thought he was, again, leaving me out of the affair, reducing me to zero and, in a sense, substituting himself for me’ (159). The lawyer is “reading-out” his preferred explanation as if that explanation were written in Meursault’s “soul.” This passage also emphasizes, again, the insistence, in this textualizing culture, on the essential *exchangeability* of individuals.

The prominence of cutting-tools in the novel—the knife, the sun’s rays as swords, the guillotine—suggest this “Procrustean” aspect of social, and particularly colonial, life. Ultimately, as fodder for the guillotine, Meursault’s body *will* serve as ritual matter. Meursault will pay with his blood for having withheld his tears. The bloodstains left after the decapitation, like the trial-record, will be the legible traces substituted definitively for his living experience.

For that is, ultimately, what legibility implies: the substitution of the track for the creature, of the dead traces for the living process. The execution will be the consummation of a *sentence*—in both senses of the word. Meursault’s death will end his ability to alter or confuse the “meaning” of his life. It will also make of that life a legible lesson to others. The sun and the blade will have achieved what Michel de Certeau calls the utopia of the modern West: a comprehensive, definitive text inscribed on a cleared, neutral space (135). Our bodies must be disciplined to norms, providing tears and other reactions on cue, and our minds must be disciplined to acknowledge certain horizons by reading certain stories: myths, folktales, novels.

This latter point brings us to another level on which the issue of conscription and inscription into legibility is important in *L’Etranger*: the book we have read *is a text*. There are powerful analogies between the process described *in* the novel and the process *of* the novel—this

one, and the novel as a genre. Lennard Davis calls an ideology a novel that a culture writes about itself for itself (24). Like an ideology, a novel presents constructed and disputable meanings as if they were natural and could be apprehended directly (Davis 26). Meursault's inadvertent acquisition of a fate is analogous to his becoming a character. He is written and thus legible. A meaning is assigned to him.

There is a code, or a system of codes, that guides the writing and reading of novels just as there is in the classification of "real" lives. The ideology of enlightenment and imperialism is as intimately connected with novels as it is with colonialism. The Enlightenment, which penetrates and standardizes all of reality, is the lamp by which all of reality is read. The Great Encyclopedia itself was an attempt to make all of social and natural reality accessible to the "light." Rational exploration of the world created a cosmos unified in principle, and thus accessible to both intellectual and commercial exploitation. The universalizing, levelling ideology of enlightenment—the methodical classification of everything under the sun—has gradually created a modern equivalent of ancient fate.

Camus makes clear, in *L'Étranger*, the way in which inquiry and explanation, whose original purpose was to neutralize the irresistible power of fate, have become a modern *equivalent* of fate. To be made a character in a novel is, like being processed judicially, to be transported into the artificially illuminated space of a discipline, or a kind of ceremony. It is to be submitted to an expert. A novel is thus another Procrustean bed. It is the scene where a necessarily reductive inquiry is conducted. Through the judicial inquiry, Meursault's life is interpreted, retrospectively, as an explanation of the murder—as a novel. The spectators in the courtroom correspond to the readers of a novel. This correspondence is especially clear given the presence of the newspaper writers as mediators in the court. Meursault is processed by the forces of meaning-production.

The final validation of knowledge in the culture of Enlightenment is its ability to generate powerful technologies. The guillotine is the ultimate in explicit technocratic penetration and "trimming into shape." Meursault calls it a work "de précision, fini et éclatant" 'of precision, polished and shining' (170). Writing is, in a much more complex way, the same sort of device. Skilled narration is analogous to the guillotine in that its workmanship gives it an air of unanswerable finality. The trial and the novel emphasize the modern, administrative form of fate in that, once complete, they give the impression

that the ending was implicit in the beginning, that it was the real point of departure.

We mentioned earlier Camus' statement that writing is "un déchirement perpétuellement renouvelé" 'A perpetually repeated sundering'. This is true in two ways, both of which are evoked in *L'Etranger*: the writer is initiated into an especially intense experience of fragmentation as he becomes a specialist in symbolic manipulation; he also wields the cutting tools. Like Meursault, the writer becomes an instrument of fragmentation and a fragmented being by the same process.

This is, we believe, the most important reason for the fusion of sun and blade in the murder scene. Meursault's act is a reaction to the slashing, penetrating heat and light of the sun, especially the sunlight reflected by the Arab's knife. At the same time, the shots are understood by Meursault to have "détruit l'équilibre du jour" 'destroyed the day's equilibrium' (95). He is inhabited and manipulated by the sun, as well as by the disposition of people and forces in colonial Algeria. He is also the one who marks, penetrates, and kills another body. He is the immediate perpetrator of an act which also seems to exist independently, making use of him as if he were merely a puppet. He can, finally, only pass on the old story. He is the intermediary between a reservoir of stories and their repetition for an audience subjected to and by their "lessons."

Virtually everything in the book's second part underlines Meursault's incorporation—his disappearance—into a discourse of power or mastery. As we mentioned earlier, the *Juge d'instruction* examines Meursault in an artificially heightened light and demands that he ratify what the Judge chooses to regard as the meaning of life. Meursault has become a case, and the case will be *produced* by professional writers posing as mere reporters. The pervasive, powerful lighting imposed throughout the story has now made Meursault's "case" seem like an x-ray. He has become an example of what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno call the "schematization" of men by all-penetrating modern discourses and institutions (35).

The journalists at the trial are like a modern, scriptocratic chorus: they will "explain" the case to a "public" whose existence is constituted largely by the ritual reading of newspapers. In one of the writers, Meursault sees a strange reflection of himself (132). Surely this supports our contention that a writer's split self-awareness has been installed within Meursault. His unfathomably rich, inextricably tangled

living experience is going to be reduced, first to a trial transcript and newspaper reports, then to the permanent full-stop engraved by the blade.

The court is like a clubhouse for the police, the court officials, and the newspapermen. As his life achieves full narratability, Meursault as a sentient being becomes irrelevant: "Tout se déroulait sans mon intervention" 'Everything was happening without my participation' (151); "mon affaire suivait son cours" 'my affair was taking its course' (110). He says of the judicial process that it is a "rite implacable" 'implacable ritual' (166), and that "la mécanique écrasait tout" 'the mechanism crushed everything' (171). Moreover, "tout le secret d'une bonne organisation était là" 'that was the whole secret of good organisation' (169). The criminal to be executed is forced into moral collaboration with the process, since he must hope that the guillotine works properly. Any alternative to the prevailing technocracy of light, script, and fragmentation is silenced.

Like a trial or an execution, narration requires fragmentation. Things must be taken apart before they can be reassembled with links deriving from and confirming a plausible meaning and legitimating a certain discursive organization. Despite the ostensible triumph of the implacable ritual, Meursault's account of his imprisonment clearly states the impossibility of honest narration, of narrative without mutilation. As he uses his memory to kill time, Meursault realizes "qu'un homme qui n'aurait vécu qu'un seul jour pourrait sans peine vivre cent ans dans une prison" 'that a man who had lived only one day could easily live a hundred years in prison' (123). Even a being's own memory cannot exhaustively review his experience. Clearly, narrative is hopeless; it is akin to a decapitation performed to preserve the credibility of a self-referential discourse.

Finally, the test of narrative can never be its "truth." Meursault says of the Prosecutor's version of the events that it "ne manquait pas de clarté" 'did not lack clarity' (153). The theme of illumination culminates in this: the "light" of inquiry, of narration, reveals nothing. It produces plausibility and coherence in accord with pre-existing codes. It is essential to a ritual whose purpose is the reproduction of an ideological "world" through the repetition of stories, but it erases experiential truth. Meursault has become the object/creation of a technique, the ritual material permitting the display of an *expertise*.

The process inaugurated by writing is consummated by reading.

Notes

1. All translations from the French are ours.

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