The Silent Men:
Muted Symbols

Of the six stories in Exile and the Kingdom, The Silent Men has had the most baffled reception. The muteness of the characters seems to have spread to the critics. Did Roger Quilliot mean to be witty when he wrote, "There is nothing to say about The Silent Men"? Nowhere else does his chapter have that flippant character, and, to be fair, Quilliot goes on to add, "except that one reads it straight through without stopping, that the characters impress upon us their presence, their poor happinesses, their pride as artisans, their angers and their powerlessness." Even so, it is a meager commentary. Peter Cryle, in the chapter he devotes to The Silent Men, observes that such remarks make up virtually all the criticism of the story.2

It is true that not much happens. The main character, a cooper named Yvars, returns to his job the day following the collapse of a strike. He and his fellow workmen slowly regain their former feelings of camaraderie for one another while remaining resentful toward their boss, Lassalle, an affable and well-meaning man, who makes a few maladroit efforts to be cordial. In the afternoon, Lassalle's daughter is stricken with an unidentified malady and falls unconscious; she is rushed to a hospital. The men, although somewhat moved, do not offer any words of sympathy to Lassalle. Yvars returns home in the evening, and the story concludes with his nostalgic longing to escape a vague feeling of depression and perhaps guilt. The characters offer no more critical promise than does the plot;
only Yvars is developed with any thoroughness, and his chief trait is an open-minded but simple candor.

Cryle himself examines primarily the ideas—social, political, and moral—and formulates an interpretation of the ending. He notes in passing, however, that many critics, including Quilliot, have flatly denied any symbolic value to this realistic writing, to which he responds, “One must recognize that the presence of *The Silent Men* in *Exile and the Kingdom* tends perforce to link it to the other stories, all five of them rich in symbolic resonances.” The only example he gives, however, is the sentence: “The workshop had become too big for the handful of men who worked there” (71). In view of the general deafness of readers to the symbolic resonances, it would seem worthwhile to call attention to some more of them.

*Symbolic*, as Cryle uses it, is a loose term, covering several types of allusive representation. Since all of them have been equally ignored in the story, the broad application of the term seems justified. Lest there be confusion, however, let me make clear that by *symbol* I do not mean an object that stands for one specific other object, or an object that relates Camus’s work to an established set of such symbols, like Freudian or Christian symbolism. As I use the term *symbol*, it means the description of an object or action in such a way that it suggests meanings beyond the ordinary references of the language, especially: (1) things that embody in an external reality the internal thoughts of the character; (2) things that evoke strong associations, literary or other, in the reader’s mind; (3) things that link parts of the story or different stories together intertextually through words, objects, or scenes, as opposed to linking them logically or chronologically, for example. Such uses of language are readily acknowledged in a wide range of authors, especially in the twentieth century, and even in other works by Camus; but it has commonly been assumed that Camus was striving for a more literal rendering of some external reality, especially in *The Silent Men*. Yet in the context of the other stories, the world of *The Silent Men* is rich in symbolic objects and events; their unrecognized presence is, in the end, part of the meaning of the story.
Like the other three stories told in the third person, but with a limited point of view, *The Silent Men* begins with a notation of the setting: “It was the dead of winter and yet a radiant sun was rising over the already active city. At the end of the jetty, sea and sky fused in a single dazzling light” (62). Apparently straightforward, this description already links *The Silent Men* to *The Adulterous Woman*, *The Guest*, and *The Growing Stone*. In the three Algerian stories, the weather is in some fashion anomalous; Janine had expected heat in the desert but finds wintry cold; Daru’s school is isolated by an October snowstorm coming hard on months of summer drought; Yvars sets out on a radiant day in the middle of winter. Since all three central characters discover their “exile” during the course of the story, the incongruous weather seems to function as an early sign of their incongruous situation.

Furthermore, as each of the four stories begins, the central character is isolated from the horizon, Janine by the sandstorm, Daru by the blizzard, D’Arrast by the foggy night, and Yvars by the morning glare. One might say that they have lost their metaphorical bearings. Janine, D’Arrast, and Yvars, all traveling at the beginning, seem to be enclosed in a psychic shell, cut off not only from their fellow human beings but also from the natural world; the stories relate their breaking out of the shell, if only temporarily.

As one might expect, then, the motifs recur throughout the stories, to reflect the characters’ evolution. By the time Janine goes up to the fort at night, the wind has fallen and the sky is clear. On the second day of *The Guest*, the sun comes out again, the snow melts, the path and the rocks reappear. When D’Arrast awakens on his first day in Iguape, a fine rain is falling; but on the day of the procession, the sun is out and the sky is clear. So, too, Yvars, who began with his head lowered and the dazzling light hiding the horizon (which in any case he no longer liked to look at in the morning), is seated on his terrace at the end, “the sky was becoming transparent; over the wall the soft evening sea was visible” (83). Obviously, there are significant differences from story to story: Yvars has probably the most limited self-awareness of the four characters, and his confrontation with the
external world seems to hold the least promise of change. Appropriately, he watches twilight fall at the end and welcomes the gentle blurring of perceptions, whereas the others have encountered the harsh light of truth.

The horizon has a particular importance in Camus's symbolic world. Janine sees the strange writing at the horizon on her first climb to the parapet, Daru and Yvars both look to the horizon at the end; moreover, in the beginning, Camus often specifically mentions that the horizon is obscured. As the place of contact between the impossible purity of the sky and the hard reality of the earth, it is the locus for a kind of truth. Yet it is inaccessible, always fugitive; the heroes who seem to have come closest to the kingdom, Jonas and D'Arrast, find it indoors. The Renegade, on the other hand, awaiting the appearance of his victim—"Nothing, still nothing from here to the horizon" (37)—Daru looking at the sky, the plateau, and "beyond, the invisible lands stretching all the way to the sea" (109), and Yvars, nostalgically supposing that he and Fernande were still young and "they would have gone away, across the sea" (84), all seem to have failed in some significant way. But Yvars is an uncertain case. His wistfulness can scarcely pass for an active assumption of human responsibility. At the same time, Camus places him at home, looking out from the shelter of his walled terrace, in the company of his family; he does not seem exiled. For Yvars (as for Janine and for Joseph Grand in The Plague), the resolution may seem perilously close to mere resignation. The quality that transforms poverty and humility into human happiness, Camus seems to imply, can come only from within, through a particular form of honesty to one's self. This increasing emphasis on individual happiness rather than mass political action surely contributed to the poor reception of The Silent Men among French leftist critics.

In any case, it is clear that Camus has organized his natural settings so as to provide a discreet symbolic accompaniment to the psychological and philosophical movements of his stories. Paul Fortier has looked at some of the other elements in this universe, linking them to the novels as well: the sun, which signifies violence, and the sea, reconciliation, for example.
Fortier treats *The Adulterous Woman*, *The Guest*, and *The Renegade*, in addition to the novels. One may dispute some of the precise symbolic values and prefer a less schematic analysis; nonetheless, the point stands for *The Silent Men* as well as for the other works: the natural environment is at the same time a realistic element and a symbolic matrix underlying the significant actions of the story.

Yvars himself is a fortyish man with a bad leg, who feels himself aging, especially on the morning bicycle ride to the factory. Cryle and others have noticed Yvars's striking similarity to Janine; both of them once delighted in sea bathing, but have fallen out of the habit and into poor physical condition. Cryle is wrong, it seems to me, to emphasize the differences between the two, and to argue that "the workman has none of the sluggish heaviness of the bourgeois housewife." Camus writes in the third sentence, "he was cycling heavily" (62); and in the third paragraph, "This morning he was pedaling along with head down, feeling even heavier than usual; his heart too was heavy" (64-65). A cliche is here revitalized into a metaphor. It is true that Yvars's heaviness relates more to his stiffness than to his size; but just as Janine tries to occupy less space on her seat, Yvars has to squeeze between the tram rails and the automobiles, while his lunch bag thumps against his side, an unpleasant reminder of his situation, as Marcel's jostling is to Janine.

This is not so much to demonstrate an identity between the two as to stress the identical functions of their bodies in the two stories. Moreover, we find that same motif in other stories; Daru, although short, is "square" (89) and powerful: "if need be, he could break his adversary in two" (101). D'Arrast first appears with "his huge broad frame . . . planted on the ground and weighed down by fatigue" (160). In every case, the size, or power, or vigor, or health, of the Europeans is contrasted to the frailty of the Arabs or Brazilians. Yet in a paradoxical correlation, the thin people seem most comfortable in the world, least exiled, as it were. The contrast is not wholly between Europeans and others, either; the French soldier on the bus with Janine is "long and thin, so thin . . . that he seemed constructed
of a dry, friable material, a mixture of sand and bone” (7). One could hardly express more explicitly his belonging to the desert. Monsieur Lassalle, Yvars’s boss, is an example of quite a different sort; but he too is “thin and dark,” and “he looked at ease in his body” (73).

The body is, logically enough, the strongest link between the human mind and the external world. Since the pattern in the four third-person stories is always an abrupt realization of the central figure’s situation in the world, the body serves as an early sign of the awakening consciousness, much like the weather imagery. The vague physical uneasiness of the beginning, however, leads to deeper and deeper exploration of the causes, and finally reveals an overwhelming sense of alienation. The material form of the body plays on its literal meaning and its common metaphorical meanings, from “dullness” to “importance.” As with the jackal-soldier, the body’s matter resembles that of the material universe; for the main characters, it stiffens.

The body is, then, almost an index to the characters’ state of alienation, or awareness of it. Those who are perceived as lords or citizens of the “kingdom” appear to be weightless. That is, of course, an illusion, as is occasionally demonstrated by such characters as the Cook in The Growing Stone or by Lassalle with his rumpled hair and his halting gait at the end of The Silent Men. The nostalgia of Yvars and Janine for their lost youth includes most powerfully a longing to be free of their bodies, and to regain that illusory unconcern about their place in the physical world. Real strength and a secure place in the kingdom can come, however, only when that weight of materiality has been recognized and accepted—as D’Arrast most graphically illustrates. Janine, likewise, transcends her body’s burden in her sprint to the parapet. Yvars gives less indication that he has understood and seized his responsibility; his final words appear to shift the blame to the boss, and his last thoughts are a wish for evasion. At the same time, the little girl’s illness has troubled him, and she “accompanied” him on his bicycle; her memory may be the stone he is now bearing. Moreover, The Silent Men recounts a day that is far more ordinary than in any of the other stories; Yvars, like his co-workers, goes through a
routine. One can easily project the regular recurrence of most of the day's activities, including Yvars's stiff-legged and heavy-hearted ride to the factory. The new burden of solidarity with the boss will simply be added to the heavy load he is already loyally carrying.

The turning point in *The Silent Men* occurs when the boss's daughter is stricken. As in several of the stories, Camus actually shifts the action into an entirely new course. In *The Adulterous Woman*, the title and the early part of the narrative lead the reader to expect an encounter between Janine and the French soldier; but then he disappears, and we realize that the conflict is between opposing sides of Janine herself. In *The Guest*, we begin—indeed continue right up to the end—to look for a confrontation between Daru and the prisoner, only to realize finally that the unseen "brothers" are the real adversary. In *The Silent Men*, the first half of the story seems to build toward a clash between the triumphant boss and the embittered workmen; yet in the end, the workmen, or at least Yvars, must confront their own inability to respond to the boss's suffering and the fact of the little girl's vulnerability.

Although Camus has worked one or two allusions to the girl's illness into the first pages, her story erupts brutally into the midst of the other, announced by the urgent ringing of Lassalle's bell. As Cryle and others have said, this bell represents the distance between the boss and his employees; it is a sign of the boss's muteness, of the reduction of human communication to the impersonal noise of a bell. Not all noise has negative implications, though; the hum of the saws and the regular rhythm of the hammer indicate vitality in the workshop. The ring of the bell for the girl's attack is different, however; "[The bell] was insistent, but in such a strange way, with stops and imperious starts, that the men interrupted their work" (79). The urgency of the communication has to an extent humanized the offensive ringing.

This noise, which shatters their routine, seems a sign of destiny. Yvars, of course, never articulates such an idea; Camus merely implies it, by having Yvars think of death just before the bell sounds. In the other stories, too, inarticulate sounds an-
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nounce the impending changes. Janine, in her bed, hears the barking of the dogs and the liquid noise of the wind, and they seem to her an irresistible appeal. Daru hears mysterious rustling noises about his schoolhouse, during the night and just as he leaves in the morning. It is as if the material universe had its own voice, to speak to those who were prepared to listen. More realistically, we can interpret these appeals as devices of point of view: the characters, already disposed to break out of old habits of thought and behavior, troubled by such factors as a disturbing environment and a cumbersome body, begin to hear messages and see codes in the natural world around them. Lassalle's bell has its full resonance only in the context of the collection. In the stories most like The Silent Men, there are similar sounds, signifying the imminent collapse of a familiar vision of the world.

Yvars's first thoughts as he rides to work turn on the sandwich in his lunch bag; it is a source of bitterness because it is just cheese, rather than the omelette or steak he likes. From this detail, Camus derives most of the exposition. As a realistic observation, it is a sign of the deprivations caused by the strike. Food is one of Camus's most frequent symbols, however, so that the sandwich takes on values far more extensive than mere description. In the middle of the day, as the men break for lunch, the once deprecated cheese becomes a source of pure joy for Yvars as he offers half of it to Saïd, who has none at all. Yvars is able to protect Saïd’s dignity by telling him, “Then it’ll be your turn to treat” (77), indicating an equality that transcends their economic and racial differences. Moreover, the mere prospect of the gesture sufficed to abolish the uneasiness created by Lassalle’s airs of superiority: “The uneasy feeling that hadn’t left him since the interview with Lassalle suddenly disappeared to make room for a pleasant warmth” (77). A few moments later, Esposito produces a jar of coffee, the gift of a grocer as a sign of sympathy with the workmen. Passing it around in a mustard jar, or drinking it straight from the pan, the men share a moment of true brotherhood.

The communal meal is one of the oldest rituals of humanity, and Camus’s use of it in The Silent Men is not particularly
unusual. There is a touching reprise at the end, when Yvars and Fernande share an aperitif. Then Yvars can at last look at his beloved sea, and can at last speak: "he told her everything" (83). Eating together is a sign of communication, a communion. It is only when one places *The Silent Men* in context of the other stories, however, that Camus’s stress on the symbol becomes apparent. In *The Adulterous Woman*, Janine and Marcel eat an anticommunal meal, of pork and wine. Marcel enjoys the fact that those foods are forbidden to the Arabs, but Janine feels heavier and sleepier afterward. Daru shares a meager meal with his Arab prisoner, and seems thereby to have inspired some kind of trust in him. D’Arrast accepts a glass of sweet liqueur and a meal of beans from the poor Brazilian family whose circle he is invited to join at the end, and his principal contact with the Brazilians comes through a cook; on the other hand, a drink with the notables leads to the disagreeable incident with the Police Chief, although D’Arrast is able to reestablish harmony at a later meal with them. The Renegade is forced several times to drink bitter liquids as his masters convert him to the service of a god of death; the story ends with his being given a mouthful of salt, when he was perishing of thirst.

Food and drink are therefore more than mere social rites. The nature of the food and the way it is offered and received symbolize the relationships among people and their relationships to the world—or to their gods. In *The Silent Men*, the symbolism is all positive. The sandwich, the coffee, and the anisette are simple, even poor, but wholesome. They are offered and taken in a spirit of real brotherhood. They thereby underscore some of the moments when Yvars is able to escape the pain of his situation and by human solidarity to transcend the alienation imposed by the harsh laws of economics, politics, and reality.

Like eating, washing is a social custom with a long tradition of symbolism, but Camus’s use of it in *The Silent Men* is not repeated in the other stories. Its most obvious reference is to Pilate’s washing his hands as he sends Jesus to the Crucifixion. The first mention in the story has barely noticeable symbolic overtones; when the boss rings for Marcou and Yvars to come to
his office, "Yvars’s first impulse was to go and wash his hands, but Marcou grasped him by the arm as he went by and Yvars limped out behind him" (75). Yvars’s reflex and Marcou’s interruption seem to be symbolic only at the most superficial level, that of courtesy and of evident class distinctions. No doubt the imagery of “dirty hands” appealed to Camus, as to Sartre, in large part because of its aptitude for expressing this contrast between the worker and the clean, irresponsible bourgeois. The first meaning of the impulse is quite clearly to show deference to the boss, and Marcou stops Yvars in order to stress the barriers remaining between them. In the light of the story as a whole, however, Yvars’s reaction also tells something about his character as contrasted to Marcou’s; for Marcou, the union delegate, most aggressively rejects any return to cordiality, whereas Yvars often thinks of responding more warmly and on occasion even does so, as when he claps Ballester on the shoulder. The apparent contrast may, of course, be due only to our privileged insight into Yvars’s thoughts; from the outside, Marcou appears hostile and rigid, but we know nothing of his private thoughts. From Lassalle’s point of view, Yvars probably seems no different, but we know his feelings and can sympathize with his failure to speak and act. By the end of the story, it also seems that Marcou (or Camus) intends the unwashed hands to symbolize the workers’ refusal to give up their principles. This symbolism comes very near the traditional meaning of washing. Lassalle wants to make a clean sweep of the recent past and begin afresh; Marcou and the workers are not (yet) willing to abandon what they have fought for. They will not disclaim what they have done.

As they prepare to leave, however, they do wash—except for Yvars. The previous incident is exactly reversed when Lassalle, returning from the hospital, passes through the room where the men are dressing. They all know about the little girl’s attack, and can see Lassalle’s grief, but say nothing. Yvars “thought that it was up to Marcou to say something. But Marcou remained invisible behind the sheet of water surrounding him” (82). Here Marcou is surely evading his human responsibility, washing not just his hands but his whole body of the dirt that represents their
human solidarity and their universal mortality. As before, Yvars waits for someone else to speak or respond, until it is too late for him to say what he thinks, but then, "Yvars dressed without washing" (83). Just as he takes the little girl home with him, he takes the dirt from his day's work.

Once he is home, he finds release, "cleaned up in the wash-house" (83), and only then can he tell the story to Fernande. In this final paragraph, as we have seen, many images come together for a final resolution: the weather, the horizon, the body, and the shared aperitif. In addition, Yvars, newly bathed, is seated on a bench while "mended washing hung about his head" (83). Despite its being evening, the end is composed of images of renewal, of which the vain nostalgia for a lost youth is perhaps not the most important. Under the clearing sky and the clean laundry, Yvars does recapture some of the past: "He told her everything, holding her hand as in the early days of their marriage" (83). At the factory, it is just this possibility of a return to the past and a new beginning that has been missing.

Camus's symbolism is thus pervasive but unobtrusive. He belongs in the modern tradition, of which Flaubert is perhaps the origin, where the symbols are never explicitly identified as such. They acquire their symbolic values through their functions in the story, weaving in and out at apparently significant moments, eventually forming a pattern of references. The reader is expected to supply meanings from another world, and these orient the reading of the text; and indeed, over the years, they will profoundly modify it. Nothing in such texts can be solely symbolic; everything must have a realistic place first.

Especially in The Silent Men, Camus selects his symbolic images from a humbler vision of reality than many other writers. To be sure, the Renegade is a figure worthy of Kafka, whom Camus admired, and The Growing Stone has some of the disturbingly mythic atmosphere of a story like In the Penal Colony; the silent old Arab on the parapet in The Adulterous Woman may remind us of the red-haired stranger in Mann's Death in Venice, just as the fly is probably a reminiscence of Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment. But apart from the Renegade, Camus shuns the grotesque and the bizarre, and there are
not even many scenes or details that seem to possess that uncan
ny fitness we sense in the magic lantern at Combray or Plumtree's Potted Meat in *Ulysses*. Yvars's lame leg never has the
impact on the reader of Hippolyte's clubfoot.

Nonetheless, Camus's stories often contain a central image; and if critics have been less sensitive to them, it is in part because of Camus's greater fidelity to everyday truth, and in part because of the critics’ own misguided preoccupations. The center of *The Silent Men* is clearly the barrel factory, but critics have commented only on its biographical origins: Camus's uncle owned a barrel factory, and there is even a photo of the young Albert on the scene. Yet these barrels represent the men who make them. Yvars's lament for his craft stresses this personal, emotional connection. The men do not fear poverty and misery; other jobs could be found. A special kind of pride links them to cooperage, however: "You don't change trades when you've gone to the trouble of learning one; this one was hard and called for a long apprenticeship. The good cooper, the one who fits his curved staves and tightens them in the fire with an iron hoop, almost hermetically, without calking with raffia or oakum, was rare. Yvars knew this and was proud of it. Changing trades is nothing, but to give up what you know, your master craftsmanship, is not easy" (65–66).

Indeed, one is tempted to call the coopers' attachment to their barrels "paternal." Certainly their loyalty exceeds the bounds of common economic sense, for rather than change jobs, they resign themselves to a humiliating defeat and an inadequate wage. The detailed technical descriptions of barrel manufacture convey more than the realistic background; they suggest something of the love and attention each man devotes to his work. The barrels are almost equivalent to children, and the deflection of the problem from the men's loss of their jobs to the boss's loss of his daughter insists on the comparability.

A terrible irony underlies the humanization of the barrels, however, for they have become obsolete. When there is no need for barrels, there is no use for coopers, either. These men are suffering from obsolescence even more than senescence. Just as the oversized factory building had grown emptier, so too the
barrels now lie empty. The ancient symbolism of the barrel, source of bounty, has drained away, leaving instead the impression of hollowness. These shells are, of course, unmistakable images of soulless modern man, deprived of the inner meaning of life. The barrel is an appropriate symbol to these men in still another way. As Yvars's description makes clear, the highest skill of the cooper lies in uniting the staves. The barrel is an objective instance of solidarity, the separate parts fitted together into a functioning whole; in this, and in the cooperative fabrication, the barrel represents not only the individual but the group—the union. The bitterest irony of the story is that the blind course of history has rendered futile the noblest of humanity's qualities, that warm feeling of solidarity among the workers. Camus's position in *Exile and the Kingdom* is consistent, however; mass actions—whether political, religious, social, intellectual; whether emanating from state, church, school, union, or party—do not touch the heart of the problem. Nothing can restore the barrel to its earlier utility, nor the cooperers to their earlier importance; and that is no one's fault. Moreover, even if time could be set back, it might not provide what Yvars—and presumably the others—most need: the happiness that comes of a full affirmation of one's humanity in an inhuman world, a world where economic laws will never be repealed and will always oppress someone.

As the title would suggest, silence is another key theme in *The Silent Men*. Cryle interprets the workers' silence as evidence of their simplicity; they adopt an attitude that becomes an embarrassment to them, but they cannot respond fast enough to the changing situation. In the end, according to Cryle, Yvars is "condemned to simplicity—and thus, in a sense, to incomprehension and injustice—because he is incapable of facing up to complexity and ambiguity." As a reading of the psychological and social implications of the workers' muteness, this is satisfactory; but in almost all the stories, silence and lack of speech play an important role.

Janine, when she awakens in the night and begins to feel the call of the fortress, "was talking, but no sound issued from her mouth" (27). Later, on her return, Marcel "spoke and she
didn’t understand what he was saying” (33). No more does he understand her, and the story concludes on her ambiguous denial, “It’s nothing, dear, it’s nothing” (33). It is not literally true that Janine and Marcel do not speak to each other, but Camus has told the story in such a way as to minimize the actual speech; at dinner, for example, Marcel seems “a husband suddenly taciturn unless he was telling how tired he was” (26). His words are few in number, and betray chiefly his rather comic incomprehension of everything around him, including Janine. Her words are even fewer. Neither of them can understand the language of the Arabs among whom they live. The atmosphere is similar to that of Ingmar Bergman’s film *The Silence*, where the soundtrack murmurs continuously in an incomprehensible tongue.

The Renegade has had his tongue torn out, and if he opens his mouth, “it is like pebbles rattling together” (34). Throughout his feverish interior monologue, Camus interjects the nonsense syllable, “gra” to remind the reader of what Cryle terms “the paradoxical opposition . . . between logorrhea and the muteness of the hero.” An excellent article by Linda Hutcheon, dealing with “*The Renegade* as a ‘new narrative,’” has pointed out the ways in which the Renegade’s (false) interpretation of the black and white of the desert and his “garrulosity” apply to the writer’s work. Brian Fitch has proposed reading certain of Camus’s other fictions, including *The Adulterous Woman*, as “new” in this sense. In short, Camus surely meant muteness to have more than just its realistic meanings. It symbolizes something in his philosophical view of the world, including the artist’s role. It is part of “an allegory of writing,” present throughout these stories.

In its most obvious form, as a failure of human communication, silence expresses the individual’s irremediable solitude. Yvars and the workers have not so much adopted silence out of pride as had it imposed on them: “their mouths had been closed . . . anger and helplessness sometimes hurt so much that you can’t even cry out” (78). Lassalle’s attitude has reduced them to the status of things. Without possessing a lexicon of such terms of *reification* and *alienation*, the workmen nonetheless experi-
ence the feeling. They have been stilled like the machines of the factory.

The feeling of isolation overflows the gulf between labor and management, moreover. At the start of the day, the men are unable to talk even among themselves: "[The workers] were silent, humiliated by this return of the defeated, furious at their own silence, but the more it was prolonged, the less capable they were of breaking it" (70). As work begins, still "all were working in silence" (72). Even at home, the humiliation had poisoned relationships; the wives were sad, and Yvars had cut short his reply to Fernande—to her anxious question about the boss, "What will you men say to him?"—saying, "'Nothing','" and "his small, dark and wrinkled face with its delicate features had become hard. 'We're going back to work. That's enough!'" (68). In a very mild fashion, Camus violates the point of view in that scene, which we see more from Fernande's perspective than from Yvars's.

As we have seen already, Yvars becomes more sympathetic than his co-worker Marcou because we know Yvars's thoughts. Inside views are inevitably seductive; we cannot help sympathizing with Yvars when we see through his eyes. By the same token, however, those whom we see only from the outside remain highly ambiguous. In many of the other stories, this ambiguity is emphasized by the perplexing actions that we witness. Did the jackal-soldier have any interest in Janine? Why did the lordly Arab advance straight at Marcel's case? Why did Daru's prisoner say, "Come with us" (101), and why did he take the road to Tinguit? These extreme cases ought to sharpen our awareness of the problem in more conventional situations; Janine's husband is ultimately as great a mystery as anyone else, not reducible to some simple stereotype, the bourgeois, the colonial, or the male chauvinist. So too with the other characters in The Silent Men; nothing in the story explicitly invites one to imagine hidden motives or unusual depths in the other characters. We can easily supply plausible feelings for everyone, especially aided by Yvars's speculations. Yet they all remain radically Other, most particularly Lassalle, who disappears behind a door, keeping the secret of his grief and whatever effect
the experience has had on him—not to mention the more mundane secret of what has actually happened to the little girl.

This Otherness is one of the devices Camus exploits most consistently to suggest his message at the end of the story. Ultimately, the narrator's voice must also fall silent, and we suddenly find ourselves before the character as an Other. As Yvars sits on his terrace, he pronounces a judgment on his boss: "Ah, it's his own fault!" (84). What, precisely, was his fault? Presumably the workers' failure to speak, which has weighed on Yvars's conscience. Must we accept Yvars's verdict, or should we find him guilty of evading his responsibility especially in the light of his nostalgic escapism at the very end? And either way, has not Camus led us to do what Yvars has just done, and what all of them have done to each other? In other words, the fundamental problem of human relations that lies at the basis of the action is suddenly transposed at the end into a problem between the reader and the text. When the narrator becomes a silent man, we recognize that the text, too, is Other.

Nor is the person-to-person communication the only form that Camus calls into question. Once again, other stories raise much more dramatic cases, like Janine perceiving the mysterious writing on the horizon. The universe itself "speaks" to those who are willing to listen, but there are valid and invalid ways of hearing. The Renegade, clearly, illustrates an interpreter who forces the meaning; even Daru may be striving for an impossible purity and clarity of understanding—his four-color map of the rivers of France is strangely out of place in this arid, monochrome world. Yvars is a far humbler figure, who seems to have given up trying to understand; in the morning, at least, he simply refrains from looking at the sea, "always there to greet him" (64) but which reminds him of loss, aging, and death.

As he pedals along, Yvars recapitulates the strike for us; his account is remarkably clear and impartial, and he blames neither his fellow workers, nor the union, nor even the boss. Yet though he presents the facts coherently, he is unable to reach any conclusion, other than his curt retort to Fernande, "We're going back to work. That's enough." As Cryle has said, in many other
instances we see that Yvars's articulation falls short of the complexity of the situation, as in his unsuccessful effort to speak about the girl's accident: "Sometimes the word 'misfortune' took shape in him, but just barely, for it disappeared immediately—as a bubble forms and bursts simultaneously" (81).46 Yvars's final line, "Ah, it's his own fault" is another inadequate conclusion. By contrast to the very lyrical, image-filled consciousness of Janine or of the Renegade, and also to the intellectual consciousness of Daru or of D'Arrast, Yvars has a literal mind. As I have been arguing throughout, he lives in a universe full of symbolic objects and events, yet his own account of them barely hints at these implicit significances.

The author then must break the silence on two levels. He articulates to us the word misfortune, which Yvars could not quite formulate and pronounce himself; but he also presents the process by which the situation enters Yvars's awareness as "misfortune." He must give us Yvars's world, if not in its fullness, at least with greater resonance than Yvars perceives. Camus lends his tongue to Yvars, but at the same time to the inanimate world; in The Renegade, that image becomes explicit, for the Renegade claims to have a disembodied tongue working ceaselessly inside his skull: "something has been talking, or someone" (34).47 There is, of course, an infinite regression of the series; for as soon as the word is spoken, it becomes part of that external "other" world. Camus's reading not only may be a misreading but also may be misread.

Silence is, then, one of humanity's first encounters with the absurd. The universe that we expect will tell us of the glories of God or at least of the wonders of nature is in fact a silent desert. Meanings must be forced from the world by a long and painful effort. In the final stories, Jonas and D'Arrast seem to have succeeded, through patience, devotion, humility, self-sacrifice, in overcoming the silence, and in the same stroke, in achieving some form of solidarity and happiness. The fanatical desperation of the Renegade, who actually tries to bite the stone (49), is one temptation of the artist; the lassitude of Yvars is perhaps the opposite. By the magnificent paradox of art, however, even the
failures are transformed. The tongueless Renegade and the inarticulate Yvars both have their say, and the humanity of their encounters with the absurd pierces through the arrogant absolutism of the one and the pathetic simplicity of the other.

3. P. 102: "Il faut reconnaître que la présence des 'Muets' dans *L'Exil et le royaume* tend forcément à la rattacher aux autres nouvelles, riches toutes les cinq de résonances symboliques."
4. P. 1600: "Le hangar était devenu trop grand pour la poignée d'hommes qui l' occupaient."
5. P. 1595: "On était au plein de l'hiver et cependant une journée radieuse se levait sur la ville déjà active. Au bout de la jetée, la mer et le ciel se confondaient dans un même éclat."
6. P. 1606: "le ciel devenait transparent; par-delà le mur, on pouvait voir la mer douce du soir."
7. P. 1579: "Rien, rien encore jusqu'à l'horizon."
8. P. 1621: "au-delà, les terres invisibles qui s'étendaient jusqu'à la mer."
9. P. 1606: "ils seraient partis, de l'autre côté de la mer."
11. P. 108: "L'ouvrier n'a rien de la lourdeur engourdie de la bourgeoisie."
12. P. 1595: "il roulait lourdement."
13. P. 1596: "Ce matin-là, il roulait, la tête baissée, plus pesamment encore que d'habitude; le cœur aussi était lourd."
14. P. 1611: "carré."
15. P. 1617: "s'il le fallait, il casserait en deux son adversaire."
16. P. 1655: "son large corps de colosse... affaissé par la fatigue, planté lourdement sur la terre."
17. P. 1559: "long et mince, si mince,... qu'il paraissait bâti dans une matière sèche et friable, un mélange de sable et d'os."
18. P. 1601: "mince et brun... il avait l'air à l'aïse dans son corps."
19. P. 1604: "[La sonnerie] insistait, mais d'une si curieuse manière, avec de courts arrêts et des reprises impérieuses, que les ouvriers s'arrêtèrent."
20. P. 1603: "Tu m'inviteras à ton tour."
21. P. 1603: "Le malaise qui ne lui avait pas quitté depuis l'entrevue avec Lassalle disparaissait soudain pour laisser seulement place à une bonne chaleur."
22. P. 1606: "il lui raconta tout."
23. P. 1602: "Le premier mouvement d'Yvars fut d'aller se laver les mains, mais Marcou le saisit au passage par le bras et il le suivit en boitiant."
24. P. 1606: “pensa que c'était à Marcou de dire quelque chose. Mais Marcou se tenait, invisible, derrière la pluie d'eau qui l'entourait.”
25. P. 1606: “Yvars se rhabilla alors sans se laver.”
26. P. 1606: “se lava dans la buanderie.”
27. P. 1606: “du linge reprisé pendant au-dessus de lui.”
28. P. 1606: “Il lui raconta tout, en lui tenant la main, comme aux premiers temps de leur mariage.”
29. P. 1597: “On ne change pas de métier quand on a pris la peine d'en apprendre un; celui-là était difficile, il demandait un long apprentissage. Le bon tonnelier, celui qui ajuste ses douelles courbes, les resserre au feu et au cercle de fer, presque hermétiquement, sans utiliser le rafia ou l'étoupe, était rare. Yvars le savait et il en était fier. Changer de métier n'est rien, mais renoncer à ce qu'on sait, à sa propre maîtrise, n'est pas facile.”
30. P. 118: “condamné à la simplicité—et donc, dans un sens, à l'incompréhension et à l'injustice—parce qu'il est incapable de faire face à la complexité et à l'ambiguïté.”
31. P. 1570: “parlait, mais sa bouche n'émettait aucun son.”
32. P. 1573: “parla et elle ne comprit pas ce qu'il disait.”
33. P. 1573: “Ce n'est rien, mon chéri, ce n'est rien.”
34. P. 1569: “un mari soudain taciturne, ou qui disait sa fatigue.”
35. P. 1577: “c'est comme un bruit de cailloux remués.”
36. P. 100: “l'opposition paradoxale . . . entre la logorrhée et le mutisme du héros.”
37. “‘Le Renégat ou un esprit confus’ comme nouveau récit.”
38. “Camus's Desert Hieroglyphics.”
39. Pp. 1603-4: “on leur avait fermé la bouche . . . la colère et l'impuissance font parfois si mal qu'on ne peut même pas crier.”
40. P. 1599: “[Les ouvriers] se taisaient, humiliés de cette entrée de vaincus, furieux de leur propre silence, mais de moins en moins capables de le rompre à mesure qu'il se prolongeait.”
41. P. 1600: “tous travaillaient en silence.”
42. P. 1598: “‘Qu'est-ce que vous allez lui dire?’ . . . ‘Rien’ . . . son petit visage brun et ridé, aux traits fins, s'était fermé. ‘On travaille. Ça suffit.’”
43. P. 1617: “Viens avec nous.”
44. P. 1606: “Ah, c'est de sa faute!”
45. P. 1596: “toujours fidèle au rendez-vous.”
46. P. 1605: “Parfois, en lui, le mot malheur se formait, mais à peine, et il disparaissait aussitôt comme une bulle naît et éclate en même temps.” O'Brien gives “calamity” for “malheur”; see my comment in the appendix.
47. P. 1577: “quelque chose parle, ou quelqu'un.”