Camus's Last Words

Perhaps it is redundant ever to say that a death is premature, and Camus more than anyone would have protested against the idea of a timely death. Certainly, though, the accident that cut short Camus's life stunned the public more than is normal, and even now renews our sense of tragic irony in human existence. Because of this accident, *Exile and the Kingdom* represents Camus's final statement; and interesting though it is, by its very nature this collection of stories seems less a climactic final summary than a set of tentative clues, composed and conceived moreover during a period of several years. With Camus, this inconclusiveness is all the more tantalizing because he was quite clearly evolving rapidly in the late 1950s. In the personal sphere, the adulation of Camus's admirers had made his public image almost as unbearable to him as the hostility of his enemies—some of them former friends. On the historical plane, the heroic age of revolt in the Resistance had given way to a postwar era of political pettiness at home, apparently insoluble conflicts in Algeria, and a cold-war sense of doom.

*The Fall*, originally intended to be part of *Exile and the Kingdom* but written in a kind of inspired outburst and published separately in 1956, reveals the process of self-examination Camus was going through. In a brilliant article written in 1963,¹ René Girard demonstrated that *The Fall* retried "the stranger," who had been the hero of Camus's first novel and the spokesman for a generation in the 1940s. In Girard's view, *The Fall* does not repudiate but rather transcends *The Stranger*, and
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is a far greater work, one deserving to rank with the fiction of Cervantes, Balzac, Dickens, and Dostoevski. Clamence, whose kinship to the artist Jonas we have already seen, partly represents Camus, the “generous lawyer” who defended Meursault; but Clamence has undergone the devastating realization that there was never a difference between the innocent criminal, the evil judge, and the generous lawyer.

Girard is perhaps too severe in denouncing The Stranger, although a corrective was surely in order, for Meursault had become a kind of cult hero. Moreover, Camus had done himself a disservice by adding a preface to an American edition of L'Etranger in which he says that Meursault “is condemned because he does not play the game” and “refuses to lie,” and alleges that “in our society a man who does not cry at the funeral of his mother is likely to be sentenced to death.” Moreover, Meursault is a Christ-figure, “the only Christ we deserve.” Some of these claims are patent exaggerations—Meursault does play certain games and does lie upon occasion—and others were uttered “paradoxically” in Camus’s own term, that is, simply as provocative sallies that have long been a staple of French intellectual repartie. Hostile critics have seized on this preface, however, to justify an exact identification of Meursault’s point of view with Camus’s. Even a defender like Philip Thody feels that Camus has thereby endorsed Meursault’s racism. Yet we know that an author may not be his own best critic, and ordinarily, a pure first-person narrator like Meursault would be understood as separate from his creator. In Camus’s lifetime, those who wished to attack the man, the moralist, or the political activist could legitimately confuse the author and his creation, and cite what evidence they chose; but now, surely, The Stranger has the right to be judged as a work of fiction, with a certain autonomy.

There have, of course, been favorable reconsiderations as well, especially Brian Fitch’s L'Etranger d’Albert Camus (1972), which analyzes the work from many different perspectives, and Jules Brody’s luminous “Camus et la pensée tragique: L'Etranger.” It is important at least to recognize that the Meursault of the last pages is no longer the same person as the
one described in the beginning. The murder, the trial, the prison, and the confrontation with the chaplain have given him new insight and moral understanding, which Brody persuasively compares to Oedipus's final illumination. The Meursault of part one is undeniably a petit bourgeois bureaucrat, a macho racist, and a callous murderer; if Camus wants us to admire him, it is obviously for none of those traits, but for the potential tragic hero within him.

Girard was nonetheless correct in calling attention to the childishly romantic pride and self-pity of Meursault's presentation of himself, which had seduced many readers. "We do not understand the disturbing role which violence plays in [L'Etranger]," says Girard, "probably because the novel is the latest successful formulation of the myth of the romantic self" (p. 527). The heroism Camus claimed for Meursault in his preface, many critics and readers had already accepted, with few reservations. To explain the flaw in The Stranger, Girard supposes that Camus began with an a priori principle and invented facts to fit it. The principle itself, moreover, arose largely from the writer's own sense of himself. The pose of indifference, the concealed longing for recognition, the devious provocations, all these characterize the not-yet-successful young writer. All are exposed, demystified, denounced in The Fall.

Without denying that Camus projected an immature version of himself onto Meursault, yet I would allow him a nobler inspiration too. In a famous scene in The Stranger, Meursault notices a journalist in the courtroom who seems to have a look different from the others, and Meursault says, "I had a strange impression of being looked at by myself." This reporter is an admitted figure for the author, who did in fact cover trials in Algiers, and who must have seen many criminals as innocently unaware of their responsibility as Meursault. In other words, Camus devised his principle to account for an observed fact, which remains, however, inexplicable: a man to all outward appearances normal may commit a monstrous crime and feel nothing; or perhaps one should say, may feel nothing and commit a monstrous crime. By adopting his point of view, Camus romanticized him, so seductively that millions of readers
believed in him and identified with him. By the time he wrote *The Fall*, Camus recognized the inadequacy of his presentation in *The Stranger*, in part perhaps because he had outgrown his youthful romanticism. When he returns to the problem in *The Fall*, however, it is not only because he wants to correct an earlier mistake but also because the “innocent murderer” still haunts his conscience.

The effort to transcend *The Stranger* is visible throughout *Exile and the Kingdom* as well as in *The Fall*. Several of the stories approximate the narrative structure of *The Stranger*. An ordinary person in ordinary circumstances is somehow drawn into an encounter with the absurd. The central figures, like Meursault, lurk in the margins of society; they say little and do little. At least until the story begins, they appear to have reflected very little on their own lives; they are, like Meursault, sleepwalkers, going through the motions of life but unconscious. The stories tell of a moment when each of these characters awakens, if only momentarily, often as a result of some unforeseen disturbance. The disturbance in Meursault’s case was, of course, the murder that Girard singles out as the locus of the flaw, explainable neither as willed, nor fated, nor purely accidental. In *Exile and the Kingdom*, the disturbances are far less dramatic and more plausible, and the pertinence of the moral analysis is correspondingly greater. In *The Adulterous Woman*, as we saw, Janine’s crime is purely symbolic, and the trial only implied; nonetheless, critics have willingly pronounced judgment, just as Camus realized he himself had done in *The Stranger*. So too Yvars, Daru, Jonas, and D’Arrast: to the extent that each one offends, it is through passivity, not willful malice; but their world is not so full of snares as to make murderers of them unawares.

In *Exile and the Kingdom*, only *The Renegade* does not conform to that pattern. The Renegade is, in fact, the precise opposite of Meursault and the others, anything but an ordinary, diffident person; he is a proselytizer, a bearer of the Word. He is no sleeper—indeed, he watches through the night; and he has thought about his condition, albeit wrongly. His murder of the missionary is premeditated; indeed, the story is the text of his
premeditation. Even the Renegade, however, may come to resemble Meursault in his final moments, if we take his last hallucinatory appeal for mercy as the same sort of death's-door revelation as Meursault's wish for a large hostile audience at his execution.

The first-person narration also links The Renegade to The Stranger. In the earlier novel, the ethical paradox of the innocent murderer is doubled by an aesthetic paradox. For the novel to exist at all, the silent, unreflective hero must be transformed into a garrulous and perceptive monologist, who delivers his discourse without motive and without audience. As we have seen, this is one of the significant features of The Renegade; the sullen, incomprehensible criminal on the verge of death can speak to us only through fiction. The disembodied voice is itself a form of alienation.

The number of motifs that Camus used throughout his life, from The Stranger to Exile and the Kingdom, is very large; the sun, the sea, silence, and food are some of the more obvious that we have considered in the stories. They serve, of course, to situate and particularize the themes that obsessed Camus. Exile and the Kingdom was not conceived as a theoretical statement, the counterpart to The Myth of Sisyphus and The Rebel. It does, however, illustrate the maturing of Camus's thought, especially on some of the practical consequences of his ideas, or on the difficulty of translating ideas into behavior.

The Stranger is an effort to reconstruct a personality. It is no doubt a fragmented psyche, as many critics have observed. From the paratactic syntax to the narrator's frequent confessions that events made no sense, the portrait accepts its own incoherence. For all that, it coheres, if only because the "I" remembers itself. But this is a fictional "I," a thoughtful mind projected into a purely sensual being. The author, as Girard rightly saw and as Camus acknowledges in The Fall, is doing precisely the same thing as the defense attorney, the examining magistrate, the prosecutor, the judges, the jurors, and the chaplain. Each one offers a portrait of Meursault that attempts to make sense of him. And in many cases, Meursault has only to say yes or no in order to impose an interpretation on the world.
Since none of the portraits is accurate, however, Meursault experiences each offer as an effort to force a hypocritical mask upon him. He therefore maintains a stubborn silence, leaving the jury to select the most plausible of the portraits—except that Camus has put words into his mouth and transferred the case before a new jury of readers. Meursault has no chance to deny this version, even though he had protested in advance against such a procedure, remarking that the trial was going on without him. The novelist evades the objection, however, by appearing to join in it, by giving us the illusion as we read of sharing Meursault's feelings.

_The Fall_ reveals Camus's misgivings about that procedure, his suspicions about his own motives, and his recognition that murderers are never innocent. To make Meursault a mere martyr to sincerity is, moreover, to oversimplify him worse than even the simpleminded judges, lawyers, and chaplains had done. Human nature remains problematic, however, and _Exile and the Kingdom_ pursues the analysis without arriving at such pat answers. Both Janine and Yvars are mutes like Meursault, to whom Camus lends perception and articulateness. Both are, in most respects, more victims than villains. Janine is guilty of little more than a fleeting sense of discontent, Yvars fails to express a sympathy he actually feels. To the outside observer, the woman who leaves her husband's bed at night may seem to commit a serious betrayal, and the workers who refuse a word of condolence to the stricken father seem to create a pointless enmity. These are not innocent murderers but innocent sinners. Yet they are sinners.

What seems to have complicated Camus's view of the ordinary person is the knowledge that perfect detachment of any sort is impossible. Tarrou, in _The Plague_, had demonstrated the principle in highly dramatic fashion; but the characters of _The Plague_ are for the most part educated and articulate. Many of them are writers of some kind, even Joseph Grand, who transforms the dreary bureaucrat into a hero of commitment. And as many have pointed out before, the plague is both inhuman and unmistakably evil; the responsibility thrust upon the people of Oran is unambiguous. For Janine and Yvars, that
is not so. They are leading the most normal of lives, minding their own business, trying to do no harm; the test comes upon them without warning, and in a guise unrecognizably simple, it demands of them something they cannot do. Camus is still playing the generous lawyer when he writes such stories; but he is no longer so certain of his case, and no longer so determined to win. He is content to strive for fidelity to the truth of human nature and reality, and to base his plea on the hope that we will recognize our common humanity.

*The Guest* most closely resembles *The Stranger* in its content, for in both stories there is a silent murderer who seems to collaborate in his own conviction and punishment. One of the signs of Camus's new outlook is his humanization of the judges, among them Daru; but before he is a judge, Daru is one of the group of common folk like Janine and Yvars, trying to do his job, trying to do no harm, finding crisis thrust upon him. Daru does more than just avoid doing harm; he is certainly a force for good in the world in the usual sense. He brings education and material aid to people in need; in brotherhood, he shares their poverty. It is impossible, in my opinion, to claim that he shares Clamence's secret guilt; that is, to accuse Daru of doing good for ego gratification, of being alone and poor so as to be seen and admired. He did not seek this job, but originally would have preferred to be elsewhere. He has accepted his place and made the best of it, coming to love it in the process. Yet just like the others, guilt seeks him out and attaches itself to him. Janine, Yvars, and Daru all realize what I think Camus was attempting in Meursault: a lonely, humble figure, unjustly condemned by a justice in which we readers and Camus largely concur. These are subtler works than *The Stranger*; the characters are fuller, more human, more familiar. The incidents in which they incur guilt are less dramatic but more plausible, more typical and hence seem more inevitable. The procedures of justice have been abstracted; implicit in the forms and in the language, judgment takes shape in the reader's mind, where we can neither deny its inevitability, nor remedy its injustice, nor escape our own complicity.

For in the end, Camus seems to have thought that judgment
was an unavoidable human activity. The professional judges of *The Stranger* and *The Plague* are two-dimensional caricatures, observed from the immense distance of Meursault’s incomprehension and Rieux’s dislike. Clamence, the judge-penitent, is a sudden closeup of those same judges, now vividly real and surprisingly like Camus himself, and like us readers too. Such self-righteous judges deserve to be exposed. Camus never came to think of judging as an easy task or one that any person should want to do. Judges are, however, only human beings, no different from common people and common criminals.

Daru becomes a victim because the role of judge is forced on him. The Arab prisoner who passes into his care resembles Meursault in many respects. Sullen and mute, he gives Daru no clue on which to base an understanding of his crime or of his character. Daru asks him some of the very questions Meursault was asked, notably, whether he felt any regret. Where Meursault denied feeling regret and, to the reader if not to the judge, explained his inability to regret anything, the Arab communicates the same lack of feeling with an open-mouthed stare of incomprehension. As with Meursault, one can easily imagine judicial defenses for the Arab that range from self-defense to temporary insanity; he simply refuses to cooperate in any of them and lets the fact of his crime stand uncontested. Even more than Meursault, he seems indifferent to his own fate, passing up chances to escape and taking the road toward the prison at the end.

The Arab makes a better “stranger” than Meursault in many respects. He will be tried under a system of justice that is genuinely alien to him, whatever his real motives and intelligence may be. The possibility of his being convicted less for the crime than merely for being an Arab is all too plausible. Clearly, though, the social and political aspects so overdetermine the situation that the moral or philosophical point made in *The Stranger* would be totally lost. And so this stranger is never called on to explain himself to us, but is presented solely from the point of view of a judge, Daru, who is a peculiarly sympathetic and humane judge, but a judge all the same.

In the end, of course, Daru is judged himself—unfairly by the
terms of most readers, but not all, and obviously not from the perspective of the mysterious "brothers." Daru makes a kind of amends to the savagely portrayed judges of the earlier works; he is as conscientious as they were perfunctory, as tolerant as they were rigid, as reluctant as they were eager, and it makes no difference to the outcome. Furthermore, he has been simultaneously judge and accused. In fact, perhaps his worst failing has been his refusal to judge, his willingness to free a murderer instead of assuming his part of humanity's responsibility to assert a moral order.

Such seems to be the implication of the final story in the collection, *The Growing Stone*. D'Arrast, a man much like Daru in his unpretentious generosity, finds himself obliged to dispense justice to a boorish policeman. Like Daru, he tries not to make a judgment, but the townspeople insist. As we have already seen, one of the signs of D'Arrast's victory is his success in finding a formula by which his own sense of detachment can be preserved and the town's need for a decisive verdict respected. Camus, through D'Arrast, seems to be acknowledging his respect for human justice. In this case, it serves to forge bonds of brotherhood and mutual good will. Even in its blunders and cruelties, it represents an effort toward a common defense against real evils. When Meursault acquiesces in his own execution and wishes for the crowd to greet him with cries of hate, at least in part he is recognizing the validity of the verdict. The court that convicted him did the right thing, even if for the wrong reason. No other institution and no mere persuasion could have awakened Meursault to the moral condition of humanity.

The judicial system in *The Stranger* works in constant collaboration with the church. In the first interrogation, the magistrate thrusts a crucifix into Meursault's face, and tries repeatedly to extort a confession of faith from him. In the final chapter, a still more persistent chaplain intrudes upon his last hours and provokes the cathartic outburst of rage. The questions that preoccupied Camus are religious questions; inevitably, a meditation on the meaning of existence, on moral responsibility, on death, must respond to a religious world view, if only implicitly. Camus's early response is obviously an angry denun-
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ciation, not only in *The Stranger* but also in *The Plague*, where Father Paneloux appears as one of the allies of the evil. When the harrowing death of Judge Othon's son breaches Paneloux's faith, he soon dies himself, as if he were incapable of surviving in the compromised universe of Rieux, Grand, and their colleagues.

Camus never changed his opinion of the organized church and the dogmatic believer. The Renegade reincarnates the all-or-nothing spirit of Paneloux, and in the encounter with absolute cruelty, he converts to worship of the evil fetish. When the rumor of a new missionary threatens to bring some moderating charity into the city of salt, the Renegade prevents it at the price of his own life. As with Paneloux, as with Meursault's chaplain, if Camus allows him a moment of grace, it is precisely in the moment of doubt.

Both *The Fall* and *Exile and the Kingdom* reveal a new attitude toward the Judeo-Christian interpretation of the "human condition." The very titles, drawing on a fund of religious imagery, suggest the change. *The Fall* alludes constantly to Judeo-Christian mythology, in the hero's name, in the baptismal plunge into the water, in the infernal rings of Amsterdam, to cite only some of the most obvious. In *Exile and the Kingdom*, only *The Silent Men* lacks some direct link to a religious tradition. We have examined most of these already—the parable of the adulterous woman, the central character of *The Renegade*, the Book of Jonah, the miracle of the growing stone. *The Guest* was originally called *Cain*, and a recent article has explored the ways in which Camus drew on the Genesis story.

This is certainly not to suggest that Camus had converted, or was even evolving in that direction. *The Renegade* proves otherwise. It does indicate that he was finding the treatments of the problems he had always been concerned with richer and more rewarding in religious writings than he had previously thought. In his earlier works, he turns naturally to classical antiquity for symbols congenial to his ideas. Sisyphus and Caligula are creatures of reason and will, whose encounters with the absurd are pure and clear. Meursault is a noble savage,
untouched by religious consciousness. He lives as Rousseau imagined men before society, in amoral oneness with nature; it is the murder that brings him into the painful awareness of his duality, wherein Rousseau located both the source of corruption and the sole chance for moral existence, the one thing that elevates humans above the natural world.

In his final years, Camus the pagan had adopted a form of perception that was profoundly indebted to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Without abandoning the fundamental concept of his thought, the experience of the absurd, he enriched his vision by acknowledging human nature to be murkier than before. Not only good and evil are problematic, but even simplicity and sincerity. Meursault’s refusal to lie is just another form of lie, and a self-deception first of all. There is a kind of Fall involved, mythical in human nature, but real and historical in Camus’s thought, and transformed by his art into the masterpiece The Fall.

In explaining the greatness of The Fall, René Girard has written that the novel “is nothing other than the critical reorganization of past themes in terms of doubles. The critical force of the rupture is nothing but the doubles becoming explicit, the writer himself taking charge of them”. This process continues throughout Exile and the Kingdom, most openly in The Renegade and The Growing Stone, which I have discussed in terms of doubles and sacred monsters, but also to a significant degree in the other stories. Camus’s biblical sources, the Adulterous Woman, Cain, and Jonah, are all involved in the drama of the sacrificial victim. Even The Silent Men, although lacking any biblical reference, evokes the myth of the scapegoat; for it is the arbitrary sacrifice of the innocent girl, Lassalle’s daughter, that restores the original sense of community to the cooperage.

The mere presence of a theme does not, of course, argue strongly for the greatness of a work. Rather, it is Camus’s originality, shared with only a few of the greatest writers, in refusing to collude in the ritual of sacrifice, once the province of religion, but which Girard claims has become in our times the function of literature more than of religion. The ritual repeats,
while concealing, society's origin in violence. The differen-
tiations that established a society's hierarchies are sanctified. In
most literature, as in a religious ritual, the reader-celebrant
undergoes the experience of trial so as to emerge reassured
about the rightness of a certain order.

For Camus, in his last works, it became urgent to denounce
the very differentiations he had advocated in the beginning. The
judge, the priest, and the missionary are all doubles of the
author and the reader; and Camus, as Girard puts it, takes
charge of them. It is a constant of Camus's life work that he
sought to reveal truths, however painful, about the human
condition. When the quest for truth led him to the realization
that he himself was the monster, the designated victim of the
sacrifice, he did not shrink from the implications of the dis-
covery. Both Clamence and Jonas are in part confessional self-
portraits of the artist as villain, that is, as hypocrite and parasite.
For the sake of society, such villains must be exposed.

They are also, like all monsters, our doubles. If Camus were
content to denounce and expel the evil, he would simply be
reinstituting the old order with a new personnel. The magnitude
of the rupture with the past for Camus lies in his bold gaze into
the abyss of that infinite regression; the fall is endless from the
posture of rectitude. Tarrou, in The Plague, had illustrated the
dilemma in practical terms; there seems to be no way not to
bring evil into the world. Yet Tarrou is a kind of double to
Father Paneloux, and both men seem to live, and die, in unison
with the rise and decline of the plague itself. Their absolutism,
even in a mode as noble as Tarrou's, seems to be another form of
the evil. In The Fall, Camus goes another step and accepts the
dilemma as his own; and in Exile and the Kingdom, he begins
working toward some other resolution than a perpetual re-
sacralization of violence in new guises. The death sentence on
Paneloux and Tarrou is not an adequate answer.

For that reason, the stories of Exile and the Kingdom do not
move toward a conventional closure, but try instead to transfer
their conflicts to the reader. In order to transcend violence, we
must first acknowledge its pervasive presence in our thought.
The stories engage the reader's complicity in some act of ritual
violence, typically a critical judgment, only to force upon us afterward the realization of what we have done. Like the dancers of Iguape, we are hypnotized and swept along by the sensual flow of Camus's prose, and then awaken to the heavy burden of responsibility we must carry.

Most of the stories conclude bleakly, as if the only moral solution were self-immolation. A willed acceptance of the role of victim can, to be sure, transform its significance. In The Growing Stone, however, Camus seems to have hinted at a greater hope, that people could be happy even knowing the truth about existence, that is, without the comfortable illusions of a social order founded on violence. D'Arrast does not achieve happiness alone; the people of Iguape prove to be capable of understanding and sharing his gesture of transcendance, and, indeed, their simple faith teaches him something, too. The miracles, vows, processions, and the good Jesus may all be fictions; but so is any human account of the universe. The most important element of the Cook's faith is that it requires no lies; the Cook can admit that his prayers are not always answered. Moreover, he can appreciate the response of a nonbeliever like D'Arrast and accept his reinterpretation of the vow. In such a context, even religious faith and courtroom justice may help one realize the highest aspirations of Camus's morality: a perfect lucidity about one's relations with the universe; honesty in one's relations with other people; and solidarity with other human beings, based on respect for their freedom and awareness of a common fate. When, as occasionally happens, the lonely Camusian hero is surrounded by others who share those ideals, there occurs a transfiguring moment of human happiness. Such moments are the reward for a life well lived, and they are enough.

1. In "Camus's Stranger Retried."


3. "est condamné parce qu'il ne joue pas le jeu . . . il refuse de mentir."
4. "Dans notre société tout homme qui ne pleure pas à l'enterrement de sa mère risque d'être condamné à mort."

5. "le seul Christ que nous méritons."

6. "paradoxalement."

7. In "Camus's L'Etranger Revisited."

8. See also the same critic's recent "Le Paradigme herméneutique chez Camus."

9. See also Alfred Noyer-Weidner, "Structure et sens de L'Etranger."

10. "J'ai eu l'impression bizarre d'être regardé par moi-même."

