

DIVERSITY AND UNITY
IN THE NAMING TECHNIQUE OF CAMUS' L'ETRANGER

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If we look at Camus' characters we encounter a great variety of names: mythological (Sisyphus, Ulysses, Prometheus), biblical (Marie, Martha, Jean), historical (Le Christ, Caligula, Kaliyev), thematic (La Peste, Mada, Salamano), and many anonymical ones. Why this diversity? Those who have read Camus are aware that the author is constantly longing for unity --- unity of man and of the universe. But faced with contradiction, diversity is for the philosopher a reality of life and the only means for man to explore the different facets of the world we live in. Our universe, as organized and perfect as it may appear, has another side where chaos and injustice prevail. The absurdity in life, explains Camus, is defined by the confrontation of these two facets of the world. Unable to understand its duality, the author will have his hero multiply his roles, incarnate as many characters as possible in order to experience various and distinct situations.

The reason why I am concentrating this study on L'Etranger is mainly because we find its hero, Meursault, at his first experience, at the "purest state" where man though innocent is guilty. This last statement sounds contradictory and irrational, but to under-

stand the absurdity in life, it is necessary, according to Camus, to be absurd oneself. For that, man has to get rid of his prejudices, consider for a moment that everything is possible and live life as it is. But what is life really like? Camus' characters present a very interesting picture of life, absurd but real.

In L'Etranger, the naming technique plays a very important role. Each character has a different label under which he can be identified and classified. Most of them are nameless, denoted by common descriptive nouns such as: the concierge, the director, the boss, the priest, the judge, the lawyer, the attorney general and the jury. If we look closely at these characters, they all represent a certain authority within a social group, relating to work, religion or law. How is this authority described?

By presenting them as nameless, we think Camus has a two-fold purpose. In the first place, the author wants to emphasize the anonymity of the characters so as to induce doubt and instability. Meursault, looking at the members of the jury, imagines he is sitting on a streetcar bench facing a group of "anonymous travellers" who are spying on him, the new arrival, eagerly awaiting his first "faux pas", so they might ridicule him.¹ In reality it is just the opposite; it is Meursault who is observing the different characters trying to show the ridiculousness of authority. Their physical appearance, their clothing and gestures contrast with the seriousness of their profession. We have the impression of facing a group

of ridiculous comedians who seem very sure of themselves. Meursault is for them a monster, an enemy of God and of society, a stranger they cannot understand and "qualify". On the other hand, everything appears so clear to the attorney general who insists on giving the "real" version of the crime and the "real" image of the accused. But throughout the trial, Meursault does not recognize himself as the person that they are describing. The picture he has of the trial is that "all is true and nothing is true!"² Still, this authority decides one's destiny.

It is Camus' second object to make a universal statement. In presenting a character as "the judge", he is erasing the individuality of the man to stress his profession. In a very remarkable way the author gives him a label, a "family" name. We have the families of judges, of priests, of directors, etc. By the role they play in society we form an image of these men without needing to know more about them.

Under a different class, but still in the same category, we find two important characters who play a significant role in most of Camus' works. They are the sun and the sea. Several critics have already examined these two elements, classifying them respectively as the images of fatherhood and motherhood.³ This identification seems quite accurate in L'Etranger. Different factors lead us to this conclusion.

The symbolism hidden in the image of the sun is multi-faceted.

According to astrology, the sun represents life, warmth and light, and for many civilizations, a God or a manifestation of divinity. It is also considered a symbol of authority and of the masculine sex, therefore the incarnation of a father. They attribute to it the task of education, discipline and morality -- all of which deal with social restraint.⁴ On the other hand the sun can also symbolize destruction. Its extreme heat is a potential cause of death, which is contrary to the image of life and fecundity. Because of the alternation of day and night, it symbolizes the cycle of life-death-renaissance, appearing eternal.⁵

The sun in L'Etranger portrays most of these images described above. It comforts Meursault during his bathing hours. It fills the countryside and the sea with life. Nature seems to feast on its rays. However, as the sun reaches its peak, it becomes an oppressing rather than a nurturing character. It does not caress any more, it weighs terribly on the earth.⁶ "Ça tape", meaning "it is beating", acknowledges Meursault at his mother's funeral, referring to the sun. And the sun follows him during the entire ceremony, crushing him with its heat as if to show its anger. The same countryside that looked splendid in the morning is now suffocating. The brightness of the sky is unbearable and the tar on the ground hursts to become black mud. The earth is the same color as blood.⁷ It is evident that the author wants to reveal the violence of this character which dominates Nature.

This same sun that witnessed Madame Meursault's funeral will also be present at her son's crime at the beach. Meursault, his fiancée Marie and friend Sintès are invited to spend a Sunday at the seaside at Masson's, an old acquaintance of Sintès. Four Arabs follow them. The morning goes by without incident. It is in the afternoon that they encounter the Arabs on the beach. A fight ensues, Sintès is wounded and seeks revenge, but Meursault prevents him from doing so. Annoyed by the tears of Madame Masson and of Marie, our hero decides to go for a walk. At the beach Meursault and the sun appear as two adversaries. The sun, once again, starts beating down on him, crushing him with its heat. Meursault keeps on walking as to resist and fight this authority. But the sun is too strong and the victim runs away from it, searching for shade and the coolness of fresh water. He is a few steps away from the spring when he sees one of the Arabs. All Meursault has to do is turn around, but the sun is waiting behind him. A step forward and the Arab shows his knife shining in the sun. It is at this moment that the sea gives out a "hard and burning breath"⁸; Meursault fires one shot and then four more. When the judge asks him why he killed the Arab, Meursault explains it was because of the sun. It is a statement which sounds quite absurd to the judge.

Let's turn now to another element, the sea, which seems to incarnate the image of a mother. For many civilizations, the

sea has symbolized and still represents the dynamism of life.⁹ Its sensuality is often compared to that of a woman. It is in water that birth takes place. But just like the sun, the sea is an element characterized with a certain duality. As well as capable of giving life, it has also the power of taking life. In L'Etranger the identification sea-mother is quite obvious. It is first suggested by the identical sounds of the words "mer--mère", meaning "sea--mother". It is also a sea that has human qualities; it is "silent", "motionless", "calm", "indifferent", "sensuous", just like Camus' own mother. It starts panting and is stifled when the sun "beats" on Meursault. Looking at the hero's mother, Madame Meursault, we notice that her name contains the words: "mer" meaning sea, "sel" which in English is salt, and the verb "mourir" in its forms "meurs" meaning I die, you die, and "meurt", that is, he dies. There is in the name a movement that goes from the specific to the general, from presence to absence, revealing at the same time a certain universality. Still playing with the name Meursault, we can find in it two other cosmic elements: the earth and the sun suggested respectively by the sounds of the words: [tɛr] -- terre, and [sɔl] -- soleil.

Madame Meursault, a character with no face, seems to portray the image of a universal mother, Mother-Nature. Its function in the novel is quite ambiguous. The image it reflects is not fixed, it has two facets very much contradictory. If it is in the sea

that Meursault feels all of his sensuality and life, it will be because of the presence of "woman" that he will be condemned to death. It is the Arab's sister and Sintès' mistress, the cause of the argument that confronts the men at the beach. Even though she plays a major role in creating the drama of the story, the author wants to preserve her anonymity. She is nameless, denoted as Raymond's woman or a "Mauresque". It is because of his own mother that Meursault is sentenced to have his head cut off. "I accuse this man of having buried a mother with a heart of an animal,"¹⁰ screams the attorney general to the jury. The man had not cried at his mother's funeral; he did not even know her age. Finally there is Marie Cardona, Meursault's fiancée, who will also precipitate death. Their relationship, which started a day after the mother's funeral, is considered a horrendous and monstrous love affair and it influences the jury's final verdict.

Marie Cardona is a character who deserves some special attention. Marie, the french form of the name Maria, from late Latin, signifies "bitterness". Marie was the name of Jesus Christ's mother, considered nowadays as the mother of all Christians. Marie was also the name of Lazarus' sister and friend of Jesus Christ. She symbolizes a contemplative life. If we examine the name Marie in its structure we notice it contains the words "mar", which in Spanish means sea (Camus' mother was of Spanish origin), and

"mari", meaning in French husband (the father was of French origin). Cardona, a Spanish last name, means "as sharp as a needle". It might be interesting to point out that Cardona was Camus' grandmother's maiden name. The combination of the two names, Marie and Cardona, one French, the other Spanish, could very well describe the origins of the author, who was of French and Spanish descent. The image of the father seems to be erased by the last name Cardona, which tends to dominate, and by the character herself who is a woman. If we look back at Camus' childhood, we discover that it was the grandmother, a harsh and overbearing woman, who assumed in the family the role of the dead father. Camus resented the authority of the woman, who portrayed for him the image of a "false father". It might explain why Meursault will refuse, throughout the novel, to accept a false "father figure", or any symbol of authority. He is surprised when the priest at Marengo calls him "my son". He rebels in prison and almost kills the chaplain who insists on wanting to be called "my father".

The portrait that the author draws of Marie Cardona remains, however, in opposition with the name that he gives her. She is a very simple and natural woman, who, like Camus' mother, loves and lives life as it is. Marie represents for the author the ideal image of authority and motherhood blended into one person.

Let's now look at Thomas Pérez, the old man "à l'allure empruntée", that is in English, "with a borrowed appearance".

Thomas, from the Ancient Aramaic, via Hebrew, means a "twin". It also signifies the "sun god", providing a sense of light or brightness. Pérez, as Dr. Alvarez-Altman pointed out in a study of the name, means¹¹: "broken, cracked, stricken". The name Pérez is very similar in sound to the word "père", that is, father. The director of the old age home, talking about the old man to Meursault, admits with a smile that he was his mother's "fiancé". It is obvious that the author wants to associate Pérez with the image of a possible father for Meursault. But it is a father who is weak, stricken, broken. Meursault compares him to a "pantin disloqué", which means a broken puppet. He limps when he walks, faints at the funeral because of fatigue and the heat. He is not at all a sun-god; he is crushed by the sun. He is a "twin" image, but a "borrowed" one, standing on an opposite pole.

Raymond Sintès is another character who reflects a certain ambiguity and duality. Raymond, a warrior name of Germanic origin, means literally "wise protection". The name contains the words: "ray", suggesting "rayon", which is in English ray of the sun, and "mond", which evokes "monde", meaning in English the world. The last name Sintès is again a reference to Camus; it was his mother's maiden name. The name Sintès is also identical in sound to the word "synthèse", which signifies synthesis. According to the symbolism of his name, Raymond Sintès should portray the image of a wise and protective person. In a very curious way, he leads Meursault to

death. It is Sintès who asks our hero to be his friend, to write the letter that will incriminate Meursault. It is again Sintès who invites him to spend that Sunday at the beach. It is Sintès' gun that serves as the weapon used to kill the Arab. A certain synthesis can be developed when studying the character and his name. It is a contradictory world that is responsible for one's life and death.

There remains the name Meursault, the hero of the novel. We have already described most of the images reflected by his name, during the analysis of Madame Meursault. One last look at the name enables us, though, to see the main theme of L'Etranger. Meurs-sault, if we divide his label in two parts, we can recognize the words: "moeurs", meaning customs, morals; "meurs", I die; "sot", meaning silly, fool, confused, deprived of all judgement; or "saut", which is a jump or a fall. Several interpretations can emerge from just looking at his name:

- I die fool, or confused, deprived of all judgement;
- I die because of silly morals or customs;
- I fall, refusing the morals of society;

All of these themes fit very well with the character of Meursault. He is judged and condemned because of his morals, he dies confused and in a silly way. He falls because of his refusal to follow the morals and habits of society. He is classified by the judge as

"Monsieur l'Antichrist" and as a monster.

He has no first name, he is just Meursault, as to emphasize the anonymity of the character. Meditating about his death sentence in prison, he talks about himself as "Meursault", as to say "any man", and Meursault portrays in fact the image of the everyday man, with his complexity and contradictions.

It is fascinating to see how the study of names permits us to analyze in a more complete way Camus' literary work. The names of the characters seem to fall right into place with the rest of his philosophy, reflecting the same unity and diversity constantly present in his art.

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NOTES

- ¹Albert Camus, L'Etranger, (New York:Panthéon Books, 1963)
p. 119.
- ²Ibid., p. 130. (Translated from the French into English.)
- ³Among the most interesting studies we mention:
- a. A.J. Jans, "La poétique de l'eau et de la lumière d'après l'oeuvre d'Albert Camus." Style et Littérature. (La Haye: Van Goor Zonen), pp. 77-95.
- b. R. Andrienne, "Soleil, ciel et lumière dans L'Etranger de Camus", Revue Romane, fasc. 2 (1972), pp. 161-176.
- ⁴Dictionnaire des Symboles, (Seguers, 1974); under "soleil".
- ⁵Idem.
- ⁶Camus, p.27.
- ⁷Ibid., pp. 28-29.
- ⁸Ibid., p. 87. (Translated from the French into English.)
- ⁹Dictionnaire des Symboles, under "mer".
- ¹⁰Camus, p. 136. (Translated from the French into English.)
- ¹¹Grace Alvarez-Altman, "Literary Onomastics in the Picaresque Novel 'Lazarillo de Tormes'", Literary Onomastics Studies, Vol. V (1978), pp. 235-236.