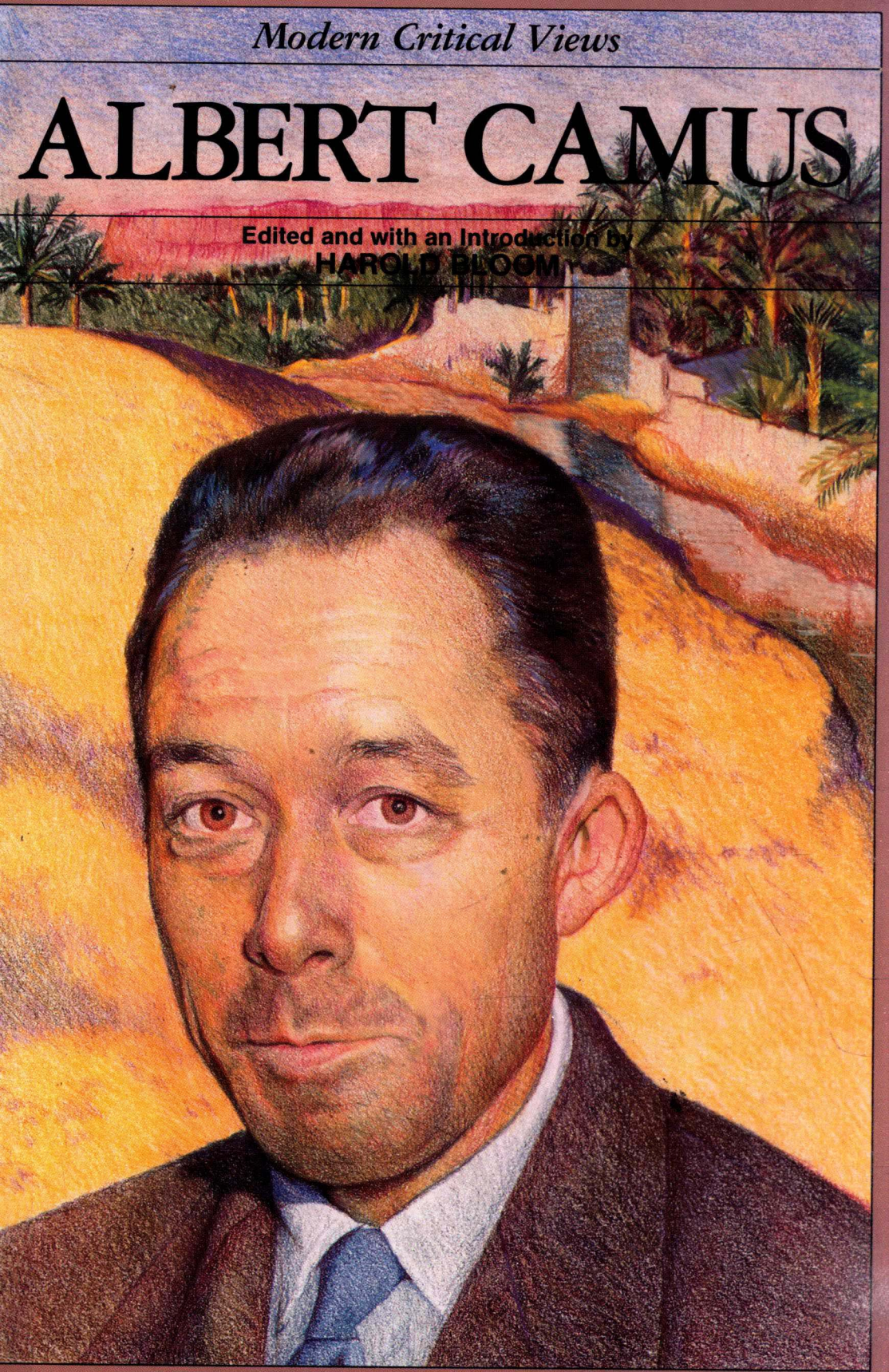
Modern Critical Views

ALBERT CAMUS

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism devoted to the writings of Albert Camus. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Olga Popov and Henry Finder for their aid in editing this volume.

My introduction makes a critical estimate of the two famous novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague,* finding each to be severely limited as fiction by their essayistic tendentiousness. Victor Brombert, analyzing the story "The Renegade," finds in it a preoccupation with the modern intellectual's death drive. In a study of the cross-play of guilt and innocence, Roger Shattuck compares *The Stranger* to Melville's *Billy Budd.* The notebooks of Camus are reviewed by Paul de Man, who shows us a figure that is "attractive in its candor, but not authoritative in its thought." Jacques Guicharnaud writes on the theater of Camus and Sartre, dramatists of ideas, while E. Freeman contributes a specific study of *Caligula,* Camus's major play.

The major extended essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel,* are seen by Donald Lazere as difficult, problematic works, though he assigns lasting value to the *Myth.* René Girard, formidable polemicist and Jansenist moralist, challenges Camus's own conviction that in *The Stranger* Meursault is somehow innocent and the judges essentially guilty. Reading *The Plague,* Patrick McCarthy traces in it the transition from Camus as tragic writer to Camus as apostle of brotherhood.

David R. Ellison, analyzing the rhetoric of *The Fall* sees it as an instance of Blanchot's "metaphorical scheme of dizziness." In a reading of the story "The Growing Stone," English Showalter, Jr., tries to define something close to Camus's final moral vision. A more political emphasis is brought to the stories in *Exile and the Kingdom* by Susan Tarrow, who reveals how they record "the impasse in which Camus found himself with regard to the Algerian situation," so much at variance with his moralized dreams.

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Introduction

Sartre remains the classic commentator upon Camus, whom he assimilated to Pascal, to Rousseau, and to other French moralists, "the precursors of Nietzsche." To Sartre, Camus was "very much at peace within disorder," and so *The Stranger* was "a classical work, an orderly work, composed about the absurd and against the absurd." Shrewdly, Sartre finally assigned *The Stranger* not to the company of Heidegger or Hemingway, but to that of *Zadig* and *Candide*, the tales of Voltaire. Rereading Camus's short novel after forty years, I marvel at Sartre's keen judgment, and find it very difficult to connect my present impression of the book with my memory of how it seemed then. What Germaine Brée termed its heroic and humanistic hedonism seems, with the years, to have dwindled into an evasive hedonism, uncertain of its own gestures. The bleak narrative retains its Hemingwayesque aura, but the narrator, Meursault, seems even smaller now than he did four decades ago, when his dry disengagement had a certain novelty. Time, merciless critic, has worn *The Stranger* rather smooth, without however quite obliterating the tale.

René Girard, the most Jansenist of contemporary critics, "retried" *The Stranger*, and dissented from the verdict of "innocent" pronounced by Camus upon Meursault:

> If supernatural necessity is present in *L'Etranger*, why should Meursault alone come under its power? Why should the various characters in the same novel be judged by different yardsticks? If the murderer is not held responsible for his actions, why should the judges be held responsible for theirs?

Girard is reacting to an unfortunate comment by Camus himself: "A man who does not cry at the funeral of his mother is likely to be sentenced to death." In Girard's judgment, the quest of Camus was to convince us

that judgment of guilt is always wrong. Girard calls this an "egotistical Manichaeism" and convicts Camus of "literary solipsism," particularly in one devastating sentence: "Camus betrays solipsism when he writes *L'Etranger* just as Meursault betrays it when he murders the Arab." On this reading, the "innocent murder" is a metaphor for the creative process. Meursault is a bad child and Camus becomes as a child again when he writes Meursault's novel. Girard considers the novel an aesthetic success, but a morally immature work, since Meursault himself is guilty of judgment, though Camus wishes his protagonist not to be judged. "The world in which we live is one of perpetual judgment," Girard reminds us, in Pascalian vein. For Girard, the figures comparable to Meursault are Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov and Dimitri Karamazov. For Camus, those figures presumably were Kafka's Joseph K, and K the land surveyor. Either comparison destroys *The Stranger,* which has trouble enough competing with Malraux and Hemingway. Against Girard, I enter my own dissent. *The Stranger* is barely able to sustain an aesthetic dignity and certainly is much slighter than we thought it to be. But it is not morally flawed or inconsistent. In its cosmos, guilt and innocence are indistinguishable, and Jewish or Christian judgments are hopelessly irrelevant. Meursault is not, as Girard says, a juvenile delinquent, but an inadequate consciousness dazed by the sun, overwhelmed by a context that is too strong for him:

> On seeing me, the Arab raised himself a little, and his hand went to his pocket. Naturally, I gripped Raymond's revolver in the pocket of my coat. Then the Arab let himself sink back again, but without taking his hand from his pocket. I was some distance off, at least ten yards, and most of the time I saw him as a blurred dark form wobbling in the heat haze. Sometimes, however, I had glimpses of his eyes glowing between the half-closed lids. The sound of the waves was even lazier, feebler, than at noon. But the light hadn't changed; it was pounding as fiercely as ever on the long stretch of sand that ended at the rock. For two hours the sun seemed to have made no progress; becalmed in a sea of molten steel. Far out on the horizon a steamer was passing; I could just make out from the corner of an eye the small black moving patch, while I kept my gaze fixed on the Arab.
>
> It struck me that all I had to do was to turn, walk away, and think no more about it. But the whole beach, pulsing with heat, was pressing on my back. I took some steps toward the stream. The Arab didn't move. After all, there was still some distance

between us. Perhaps because of the shadow on his face, he seemed to be grinning at me.

I waited. The heat was beginning to scorch my cheeks; beads of sweat were gathering in my eyebrows. It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother's funeral, and I had the same disagreeable sensations—especially in my forehead, where all the veins seemed to be bursting through the skin. I couldn't stand it any longer, and took another step forward. I knew it was a fool thing to do; I wouldn't get out of the sun by moving on a yard or so. But I took that step, just one step, forward. And then the Arab drew his knife and held it up toward me, athwart the sunlight.

A shaft of light shot upward from the steel, and I felt as if a long, thin blade transfixed my forehead. At the same moment all the sweat that had accumulated in my eyebrows splashed down on my eyelids, covering them with a warm film of moisture. Beneath a veil of brine and tears my eyes were blinded; I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and, less distinctly, of the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs.

Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. And so, with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began. I shook off my sweat and the clinging veil of light. I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this beach on which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more into the inert body, on which they left no visible trace. And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing.

The "absurd" and the "gratuitous" seem wrong categories to apply here. We have a vision of possession by the sun, an inferno that fuses consciousness and will into a single negation, and burns through it to purposes that may exist, but are not human. Gide's Lafcadio, a true absurdist, said he was not curious about events but about himself, while Meursault is not curious about either. What Meursault at the end calls "the benign indifference of the universe" is belied by the pragmatic malevolence of the sun. The true influence upon *The Stranger* seems to me Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and for the

whiteness of the whale Camus substitutes the whiteness of the sun. Meursault is no quester, no Ahab, and Ahab would not have allowed him aboard the *Pequod*. But the cosmos of *The Stranger* is essentially the cosmos of *Moby-Dick;* though in many of its visible aspects Meursault's world might seem to have been formed in love, its invisible spheres were formed in fright. The Jansenist Girard is accurate in finding Gnostic hints in the world of Camus, but not so accurate in judging Camus to possess only a bad child's sense of innocence. Judging Meursault is as wasteful as judging his judges; that blinding light of the sun burns away all judgment.

II

Forty years after its initial publication, Camus's *The Plague* (1947) has taken on a peculiar poignance in the era of our new plague, the ambiguously named AIDS. *The Plague* is a tendentious novel, more so even than *The Stranger*. A novelist requires enormous exuberance to sustain tendentiousness; Dostoevsky had such exuberance, Camus did not. Or a master of evasions, like Kafka, can evade his own compulsions, but Camus is all too interpretable. The darkest comparison would be to Beckett, whose trilogy of *Molloy, Malone Dies,* and *The Unnamable* conveys a sense of menace and anguish, metaphysical and psychological, that dwarfs *The Plague*.

Oran, spiritually rejecting the healthy air of the Mediterranean, in some sense brings the Plague upon itself; indeed Oran *is* the Plague, before the actual infection arrives. That may sound impressive, but constitutes a novelistic blunder, because Camus wants it both ways and cannot make it work either way. Either the relatively innocent suffer an affliction from outside, or the at least somewhat culpable are compelled to suffer the outward sign of their inward lack of grace. Truth doubtless lies in between, in our lives, but to *represent* so mixed a truth in your novel you must be an accomplished novelist, and not an essayist, or writer of quasi-philosophical tales. Dostoevsky dramatized the inwound textures of transcendence and material decay in nearly every event and every personage, while *The Plague* is curiously bland whenever it confronts the necessity of dramatizing anything.

I am unfair in comparing Camus to Beckett, Kafka, Dostoevsky, titanic authors, and it is even more unfair to contrast *The Plague* with Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities,* since Dickens is very nearly the Shakespeare of novelists. Yet the two books are surprisingly close in vision, structure, theme, and in the relation of language to a reality of overwhelming menace. Camus's Plague is a version of Dickens's Terror, and Dr. Rieux, Rambert, Father Paneloux, Tarrou, and the volunteer sanitary workers all follow in the path

of the noble Carton, since all could proclaim: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done." One can think of the Plague as AIDS, Revolutionary Terror, the Nazi occupation, or what one will, but one still requires persuasive representations of persons, whether in the aggregate or in single individuals.

"Indifference," properly cultivated, can be a stoic virtue, even a mode of heroism, but it is very difficult to represent. Here also Camus fails the contest with Melville or Dostoevsky. Consider a crucial dialogue between Tarrou and Dr. Rieux, both of them authentic heroes, by the standards of measurement of any morality, religion, or societal culture:

> "My question's this," said Tarrou. "Why do you yourself show such devotion, considering you don't believe in God? I suspect your answer may help me to mine."
>
> His face still in shadow, Rieux said that he'd already answered: that if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him. But no one in the world believed in a God of that sort; no, not even Paneloux, who believed that he believed in such a God. And this was proved by the fact that no one ever threw himself on Providence completely. Anyhow, in this respect Rieux believed himself to be on the right road—in fighting against creation as he found it.
>
> "Ah," Tarrou remarked. "So that's the idea you have of your profession?"
>
> "More or less." The doctor came back into the light.
>
> Tarrou made a faint whistling noise with his lips, and the doctor gazed at him.
>
> "Yes, you're thinking it calls for pride to feel that way. But I assure you I've no more than the pride that's needed to keep me going. I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this; there are sick people and they need curing. Later on, perhaps, they'll think things over; and so shall I. But what's wanted now is to make them well. I defend them as best I can, that's all."
>
> "Against whom?"
>
> Rieux turned to the window. A shadow-line on the horizon told of the presence of the sea. He was conscious only of his exhaustion, and at the same time was struggling against a sudden, irrational impulse to unburden himself a little more to his companion; an eccentric, perhaps, but who, he guessed, was one of his own kind.

"I haven't a notion, Tarrou; I assure you I haven't a notion. When I entered this profession, I did it 'abstractedly,' so to speak; because I had a desire for it, because it meant a career like another, one that young men often aspire to. Perhaps, too, because it was particularly difficult for a workman's son, like myself. And then I had to see people die. Do you know that there are some who *refuse* to die? Have you ever heard a woman scream 'Never!' with her last gasp? Well, I have. And then I saw that I could never get hardened to it. I was young then, and I was outraged by the whole scheme of things, or so I thought. Subsequently I grew more modest. Only, I've never managed to get used to seeing people die. That's all I know. Yet after all—"

Rieux fell silent and sat down. He felt his mouth dry.

"After all—?" Tarrou prompted softly.

"After all," the doctor repeated, then hesitated again, fixing his eyes on Tarrou, "it's something that a man of your sort can understand most likely, but, since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence?"

Tarrou nodded.

"Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that's all."

Rieux's face darkened.

"Yes, I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle."

"No reason, I agree. Only, I now can picture what this plague must mean for you."

"Yes. A never ending defeat."

Tarrou stared at the doctor for a moment, then turned and tramped heavily toward the door. Rieux followed him and was almost at his side when Tarrou, who was staring at the floor, suddenly said:

"Who taught you all this, Doctor?"

The reply came promptly:

"Suffering."

"Indifference" to transcendence here is a humanistic protest "in fighting against creation as he found it," a defense of the dying against death. It is a stoicism because Rieux is no longer "outraged by the whole scheme of things," even though he continues to know that "the order of the world is shaped by death." The best aesthetic touch here is the moment when Tarrou and Rieux come to understand one another, each finding the meaning

of the Plague to be "a never ending defeat." But this is wasted when, at the conclusion of the passage I have quoted, Rieux utters the banality that "suffering" has taught him his pragmatic wisdom. Repeated rereadings will dim the passage further. "A shadow-line on the horizon told of the presence of the sea." Conrad would have known how to integrate that into his complex Impressionism, but in Camus it constitutes another mechanical manifestation of symbolism, reminding us that Oran opened itself to the Plague by turning its back upon the sea.

Camus was an admirable if confused moralist and the legitimate heir of a long tradition of rational lucidity. He did not write a *Candide* or even a *Zadig;* I cannot recall one humorous moment anywhere in his fiction. *The Stranger* and *The Plague,* like his other fictions, are grand period pieces, crucial reflectors of the morale and concerns of France and the Western world in the 1940s, both before and after the Liberation from the Nazis. Powerful representations of an era have their own use and justification and offer values not in themselves aesthetic.

VICTOR BROMBERT

"Le Renégat," or the Terror of the Absolute

Future generations may well admire, above all the rest of Camus's work, the nightmarish perfection of this parable, with its incantatory rhythms and blinding images of pain. It is, however, a disturbing text. Brutality assumes hysterical proportions. Feverish, convulsive images build up to an apocalypse of cruelty.

"Quelle bouillie, quelle bouillie!" The opening words refer to the pulp-like state of the narrator's mind. But it is his body which was first literally beaten to a pulp. In an unlivable, "maddening" landscape, under the rays of a savage sun, the human flesh is exposed to the worst indignities. In the white heat of an African summer, the victim is whipped and salt is lavishly sprinkled on his wounds. Beaten about the head with wet ropes until his ears bleed, he is left moaning under the eyes of a bloodthirsty Fetish. Sadistic women assist his torturers, while he in turn is forced to witness the torture and rape of others. Inhuman cries, bestial matings, orgiastic rituals culminate in scenes of mutilation. His tongue is cut out, his mouth filled with salt. But nothing seems to satisfy this lust for pain. The victim himself—willing collaborator of his tormentors—yearns for more punishment.

Punctuated by onomatopoeic effects (the submissive interjection *ô*, the guttural *râ, râ*, the haunting rattle of thirst, hate and death), this frenzied tale offers no respite. But what is all this violence about? Why does the narrator accept it with gratitude, even with relish? On the surface, the story appears simple enough. A student in a theological seminary is consumed with the

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From *The Intellectual Hero: Studies in the French Novel 1880–1955*. © 1960, 1961 by Victor Brombert. J. B. Lippincott, 1961.

desire to convert heathens, to force upon others the truth of his faith. He decides to set out as a missionary to the African "city of salt," Taghâsa—a "closed city" which few have entered, and from which even fewer have returned. Having heard of the spectacular cruelty of its inhabitants, he feels attracted by the glorious possibility of converting them to the God of Love. Although warned by his superiors that he is not ready, not "ripe," he dreams of penetrating into the very sanctuary of the Fetish, of subjugating the savages through the sheer power of the Word.

Events take, however, an unexpected turn. He discovers that evil is stronger than he thought, and soon accepts this strength as the only truth. The tortured missionary is thus, ironically, converted by the very Fetish he set out to destroy. He discovers the joy and the power of hatred. His new masters teach him how to despise love. He adores, as he has never adored before, the axlike face of the Fetish who "possesses" him. At the end of the story, as though to outdo his new masters and to avenge himself on his old ones, he savagely kills the new missionary, while calling for the eternal Reign of Hatred.

The virtuosity of these pages is remarkable. Nowhere else has Camus revealed himself so accomplished a master of images, sounds and rhythms. The fulgurating whiteness of the landscape, the piercing sun-fire of this white hell, the liquefaction of time under the burning refraction of a thousand mirrors—all this is suggested in the hallucinating interior monologue which presses forward as though indeed the only speech left the tongueless narrator were the metaphorical "tongue" of his feverish brain. In this "cold torrid city" Taghâsa, with its iron name and the steel-like ridges of its landscape, a defiant race has built a surrealistic city of salt.

The salt and the sun—these are indeed the basic images in "Le Renégat." The word "sun," in itself symbol of absolute violence, appears up to four times in the same paragraph. "Savage" and "irresistible," it is the sun of death and of flies. It "beats," it "pierces," making holes in the overheated metal of the sky. Visual images, as well as images of sound and touch, are relentless reminders of the theme of hardness. The narrator hears in his own mouth the sound of rough pebbles. He fondles the barrel of his gun, while the stones and rocks all around him crackle from the heat. There is hardly a transition between the ice-coldness of the night and the crystal-like dazzlement of the day. But it is the very rhythm of the speech—panting, harsh, elliptical yet smooth—which marks the greatest achievement of this text. Audacious, yet pure in a Racinian manner, the language and the syntax swiftly glide from affirmation to negation.

Virtuosity is, however, not Camus's purpose. Even when originally

inspired by vivid personal impulses and sensations (surrender to air, sun, water; love of nature; pagan sensuality), most of Camus's writing seems irresistibly drawn toward an allegorical meaning. The very titles of his work which so often suggest a loss, a fall, an exile or a spiritual disease, point to a parabolic tendency and at times even seem to come close to Christian theological concerns. He may be, like Jean-Baptiste Clamence in *La Chute,* an *ailing* prophet, sick with the very illusions and weakness he feels compelled to denounce. But this solidarity with illness only makes the diagnosis more urgent.

The missionary in "Le Renégat," who discovers that only guns have souls, is very sick indeed. His sickness, a particularly dangerous one: the obsessive quest for the absolute. His superiors at the seminary are perfectly right: he does not know "who he is." This ignorance of his true self sets the stage for the most shocking discoveries. But, on the symbolic level, it also points to the transcendental urges which bring about self-negation and self-destruction.

Who, indeed, is the narrator? Who is this missionary-renegade with his desire for "order" and his dream of absolute power? "Dirty slave," he calls himself with characteristic self-hatred. Intelligent, but hard-headed (*"mulet," "tête de vache"*), he is from his youth on attracted to cruelty, finding the very idea of barbarians exciting. A hunter of pain, he imagines that the very girls in the street will strike at him and spit in his face. He dreams of teeth that tear, and enjoys the voluptuous image of his imagined pain.

This masochistic eroticism which instinctively leads him to Taghâsa is clearly of a symbolic nature. The rape by the evil Fetish is perpetrated not so much on his body as on his mind. The missionary surrenders to the Fetish in a quasi-sexual ecstasy of pain. But this surrender is of an intellectual nature: the allegory deals with the drama of the mind. In a climate whose extreme heat precludes contact between human beings, his new masters, these "lords" of the salt mines, succeed in brainwashing the absolutist, or rather in converting him. *Absolute* dedication to good is transmuted into *absolute* dedication to evil.

The allegorical identity of the Renegade thus emerges. He is the modern intellectual, heir to a Humanist culture, but now impatient with the "seminary" coziness of his tradition and with its sham, and who, in search of systems and ideologies, espouses totalitarian values that have long ago declared war (and he knows it!) on the thinker and his thought. Thus amorous hate and amorous surrender are the logical consequence of a denial of life in favor of abstraction. The missionary-intellectual believes he is out to convert the barbarians; in fact he seeks tyranny in order to submit to it.