

## Preface to *The Stranger*, Albert Camus

### Preface to *The Stranger*<sup>1</sup>

I summarized *The Stranger* a long time ago, with a remark that I admit was highly paradoxical: "In our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death." I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game. In this respect, he is foreign to the society in which he lives; he wanders, on the fringe, in the suburbs of private, solitary, sensual life.

And this is why some readers have been tempted to look upon him as a piece of social wreckage. A much more accurate idea of the character, or, at least, one much closer to the author's intentions, will emerge if one asks just how Meursault doesn't play the game. The reply is a simple one: he refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say what isn't true. It is also and above all, to say more than is true, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, to express more than one feels.

This is what we all do, every day, to simplify life. He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings, and immediately society feels threatened. He is asked, for example, to say that he regrets his crime, in the approved manner. He replies that what he feels is annoyance rather than real regret. And this shade of meaning condemns him.

For me, therefore, Meursault is not a piece of social wreckage, but a poor and naked man enamored of a sun that leaves no shadows. Far from being bereft of all feeling, he is animated by a passion that is deep because it is stubborn, a passion for the absolute and for truth. This truth is still a negative one, the truth of what we are and what we feel, but without it no conquest of ourselves or of the world will ever be possible.

One would therefore not be much mistaken to read *The Stranger* as the story of a man who, without any heroics, agrees to die for the truth. I also happened to say, again paradoxically, that I had tried to draw in my character the only Christ we deserve. It will be understood, after my explanations, that I said this with no blasphemous intent, and only with the slightly ironic affection an artist has the right to feel for the characters he has created.

January 8, 1955

Published as a preface to the American University edition, 1958 <sup>1</sup>When *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*) was published in 1942, Camus noted down his reactions to some of the criticisms and interpretations that appeared in the French press. In 1942, for example, he wrote in his *Carnets II* (pp. 32-4; Alfred A. Knopf edition, pp. 20-2) the draft of a long letter pointing out how completely his book had been misunderstood by a critic who had "not taken into account" the scene in which Meursault explains his attitude to the priest. In all probability, this letter was inspired by a review the Catholic critic André Rousseaux had published in *Le Figaro littéraire* on July 17, 1942.

At that time, however, Camus insisted mainly on the way in which his character "defined himself negatively," and did not really present him as potentially heroic. He took a further step toward doing this in an interview published in *Le Littéraire* on August 10, 1946, when he told Gaëton Picon that the critics had failed to see the importance of the Algerian atmosphere in *The Stranger*. The men in Algeria, he explained, "live like my hero, in complete simplicity. Naturally, you can understand Meursault, but an Algerian will do so much more freely and more fully." The 1955 preface is directed first and foremost against critics like Father Troisfontaines, Wyndham Lewis, Pierre Lafue, and Aimé Patri, who have argued that Meursault was "a schizophrenic," or "a moron," or have seen him as an example of the mechanization and depersonalization of modern life. —P.T.

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