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**A RE-EXAMINATION OF "FORM AND MEANING" IN CAMUS' *Le Malentendu***\*

"La plupart des hommes sont comme moi. Ils sont incapables de vivre dans un univers où la pensée la plus bizarre peut en une seconde entrer dans la réalité — où la plupart du temps elle y entre comme un couteau dans le coeur."

Albert Camus, *Caligula*

It would be legitimate to argue that the interpretations of *Le Malentendu* which I have read seemed to be somehow unrealistic and that perhaps a re-evaluation was needed. "Camus himself remarked that he considered the play to have been a failure for the simple reason that everybody he met kept asking him what he meant. If they needed to ask, he argued, then the play itself was not clear, and he had not been successful as a playwright", wrote Philip Thody<sup>1</sup>. The play seemed therefore open to various interpretations. The second point that attracted me was that, according to one of his critics, "Camus had never cut himself off from conversation with Christian thinkers but stood in a relation of tension to Christianity"<sup>2</sup>. My own impression was that *Le Malentendu* was a vivid illustration of an attempt on the part of Camus to bridge the Christian *Agape* and the Hellenic *Eros*, and that other themes were secondary ingredients which might have been overemphasized by Camus' critics or indeed students. My intention here is not to oppose, but to rebuild, not to criticise but to "demythologize". I shall call upon a new form of literary criticism which proceeds from an essentialist's view of the world.

*Le Malentendu* can be considered an illustration of Bergson's theory of pure perception. Indeed, the title of Camus' play and the action are based on the gap existing between partial and pure perception<sup>3</sup>. The "mis-understanding" is generated at the level of forms which uncover (or cover) parts of truth only — and meanings are sometimes left in a vacuum as the

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<sup>1</sup> *Albert Camus 1913-60*, Hamish Hamilton, 1961, p. 65-

<sup>2</sup> Thomas L. Hanna, *Albert Camus and the Christian Faith*, in *Camus. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Edited by Germaine Brée, Prentice-Hall. 1962. p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matière et Mémoire*. Editions du Centenaire. P.U.F. 1963, pp. 43-48.

words do not fully represent their semantic quota. Similarly, some of the characters carry more than their "phonological" impact and *Le Malentendu* must be approached with some understanding of the Saussurian rapport of *Signifié/signifiant*<sup>4</sup> if one wishes to attempt a satisfactory study of "form and meaning" in this short creative study which might be called Camus' main Christian play. The present *analysis* will no doubt upset some of the preconceived ideas one might hold about Camus and a certain feeling of the "absurd", which, as Philip Thody puts it, "can occur only when two elements are present — the desire of the human mind that the world should be explicable in human terms, and the fact that the world is not thus explicable"<sup>5</sup>. With *Le Malentendu*, the theological element is disguised beneath a coat of realism which is lined with metaphysics.

One of the keys to an essentialist approach to literary criticism is that any critic, but also any individual, and therefore any book character, has two identities; what I shall call the *lui*, and the *soi*. With most people, only the *soi* has been developed. It is what relates any person to his milieu. With some others, a *lui* has had a chance to sprout. This *lui* is very strong with some, or very weak and practically non-existent with others. The link is then established with what Artaud<sup>6</sup> calls the divine, with what most poets refer to as a matter, or if they have any religion, God. It spreads from a type of *transparence* described in great detail by Giraudoux in *Ondine*,<sup>7</sup> and which is a major ingredient in any Tragedy. This element of *transparence* allows the *lui* and the *soi*<sup>8</sup> to meet. Some individuals are purer than others, more sensitive, it seems, or they take after what the Christians call *Revelation*. In literature, some characters are sometimes endowed with this salient feature. They are transcendental<sup>9</sup>. But as Giraudoux puts it, talking of human beings: "La transparence. Ils en ont peur. Elle leur paraît le pire secret"<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Cinquième Edition, Paris, Payot, 1960, pp. 162-63.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> *Le Théâtre et son Double* needs re-examination in an essentialist way.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Giraudoux, *Ondine*, Grasset, 1939, pp. 138-148.

<sup>8</sup> Important books for the understanding of the rapport *lui/soi*: Eugène Ionesco, *Notes et Contre-notes*, Gallimard, 1966, and Jacques Ellul, *Les Nouveaux Possédés*, Fayard, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Charles P. Marie, "Les Possédés de Transcendance — Maurice Clavel, Pierre-Henri Simon, Paul Claudel" (a study of *L'Annonce faite à Marie*, by Paul Claudel) in *Claudel Studies*, Dallas University, April 1976.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 146.

This element of *transparence* is one of the keys to *Le Malentendu*<sup>11</sup>. Whereas Martha is limited to her *soi*, Jan shows the characteristics of the transcendental hero: “il exagère l’allure de l’innocence” (*M.* p. 199), and makes an attempt at covering a gap which exists between his *lui* and the *soi* of others, although it is clear from the beginning that he possesses both a *lui* and a *soi*. Jan can be in turn a *lui* or a *soi*. His objective, however, is to gain recognition by adopting the language of the *soi*, language which is spoken by both La Mère and Martha at the beginning of the play. “Jan: Je finirai bien par trouver des mots qui arrangeront tout” (*M.* p. 180). Until such a time, Jan will find it wiser to accept the “conventions” imposed upon him by Martha, so that everything seems clear to her between her and him. However, if Jan respects Martha’s conventions, Martha does so only when it suits her purpose, and her word cannot be relied upon.

Martha is worldly, Jan is godly. The one is virtually a fiend (but this is the nature of mankind), the other is trustworthy. The one builds up a world of contradictions, linked as it is with her own desires, the other displays patience and equanimity. Martha represents *Eros*, Jan *Agape*,<sup>12</sup> and one should not be confused by the existence of Maria who is, it seems, only a worldly coverage for Jan at the level of his *soi*. The main point in the structuring of the plot is that it is upon the *lui* element in Jan that the action is built. The “transcendental” Jan does not actually lose his humanity, but is the Son of Man, through transparency.

Martha has certainly kept a feeling for an ideal, which is a country where the sun shines and towards which all her energies — her reason, her imagination, her crimes even — are directed. It is misrepresentation of an absolute, but it is a worldly representation. She is not prepared to accept any revelation, and had she recognized the Messiah in the person of her brother, is not actually certain that she would not have murdered him anyway. In *Amphitryon 38*, Giraudoux had presented a heroine who was pleased with her condition and her limitations and who actually refused to rebel against the gods, as she thought that everything was the best in the best possible world: *Alemène* says “Il n’est pas une péripétie de la vie humaine que je n’admette, de la naissance à la mort”<sup>13</sup>. Martha’s standpoint is not dissimilar, although

<sup>11</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Malentendu*, Editions Gallimard, 1958. The reference text used here is a Livre de Poche publication, *Caligula* suivi de *Le Malentendu* nouvelles versions. *M* in the text denotes *Le Malentendu*.

<sup>12</sup> An analysis of the Western World which is closely related to this question will be found in *Trahison de l’Occident*. Calmann-Lévy, 1975, written by the historian Jacques Ellul.

<sup>13</sup> *Amphitryon 38*, Grasset, 1929, p. 90.

Camus makes her adopt an attitude which is diametrically opposed — that is rebellion: “Oh! Je hais ce monde où nous en sommes réduits à Dieu” (*M.* p. 241). This is a tragic recognition of the unknown and unaccepted *lui*.

*La Mère* is an attractive figure. She obviously represents humanity, and probably humanity in the person of the Church<sup>14</sup>. She is closer to the origin, although she is tired of being, and she can recall in the depth of her memory, the memory of the origin<sup>15</sup>. It is true that her relationship with the Father, when He was alive, was not always altogether enlightening: “Nous n’avions même pas le temps de penser l’un à l’autre et, avant même qu’il fût mort, je crois que je l’avais oublié” (*M.* p. 193). It is of course tempting when one knows the part played by his mother in Camus’ life, and when one is aware of the classical sources, to attempt to establish the terms of an Oedipus complex which would appear at the level of Jan and *La Mère*, but it would be confusing “form and meaning” and render possible yet another “misunderstanding” in the play. Humanity divides her attitudes between love and hatred. There is a *lui* as well as a *soi* with humanity — and similarly there is God and Tradition within the Church itself. In the absence of the Son (but we know that “il reviendra”) (*M.* p. 163)<sup>16</sup> the *soi* of the mother may have taught Martha “à ne rien respecter” (*M.* p. 234). Born in a different time and age, a child of our generation, the links of Martha’s memory with the memory of the origin are very diffuse. As was the case with the Greeks, she thinks and she is full of reasoning, and like the Romans, she plans and organizes her life in a self-centred sort of way. The question of the acceptance of Jan into the room — also referred to as the Inn (which is a bigger unit) or indeed Europe (which is bigger still) — is of paramount importance since it depends on the relative relevance of both *La Mère*’s and Martha’s attitudes. As Jan puts it: “Si je comprends bien, l’une de vous m’admettra par intérêt et l’autre par indifférence?” (*M.* p. 214). Call it a tragedy, or a well-known tale, so carefully disguised that Camus’ contemporaries could not see its true meaning, *Le Malentendu* is the story of Christian Revelation and of its rejection by man. First of all, the Son is either

<sup>14</sup> The Church elements appear when the revelation is known by an increasing number of people. They then die to the world because they love Him and recognize His love.

<sup>15</sup> The question of perception and memory must be envisaged in what Bergson called *durée*. The concept of freedom is very much linked with this, and is different from free-will, a distinction one must make when dealing with Camus, and more so even with Sartre. According to Bergson: “Nous sommes libres quand nos actes émanent de notre personnalité entière, quand ils l’expriment, quand ils ont avec elle cette indéfinissable ressemblance qu’on retrouve parfois entre l’oeuvre et l’artiste.” *Essai sur les données immédiates de la Conscience*, Alcan, 1889, p. 129. The benevolence shown by *La Mère* to Jan, is of this nature.

<sup>16</sup> The first two words of the play are pronounced by *La Mère*.

accepted or set aside, then accepted after his death by the bulk of humanity (remember the Scriptures: “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?”) and the Church. There remains the lost sheep, Camus, the Rebel. Camus’ own interest in the fate of the lost sheep is certainly of dramatic importance, but he also dwells upon the Christ-like sacrifice. Will Jan drink the symbolic cup? Poison or tea? Here lies the distance between *être* and *paraître*. Because of some odd premonition, the mother does not want him to, but the rebellious child does.

In the first place, Jan is presented as a man, a married man, a happy man, a perfectly normal human being endowed with a probably lovely wife, Maria. The *soi* element is therefore respected. One also suspects that there is a link between Jan and the Sun, as there is one through Camus and Algeria, but one must not be fooled too easily and discard a symbolic value, the concept of clarity. Jan’s country is not just a country where the sun shines and where it is good to live; this would be too simple. Like Bertha of Giraudoux’ *Ondine*, Camus’ Martha fails to understand the identity of Jan, which she shows no interest in trying to find out; but the subconscious of the two characters is full of the right imagery:

*La Mère*: Est-ce cela, Martha, qui te fait rêver?

*Martha*: Oui, j’en ai assez de porter toujours mon âme, j’ai hâte de trouver ce pays où le soleil tue les questions. Ma demeure n’est pas ici. (*M.* p. 169).

For Jan, the *Noces* took place long ago, the Sun, Maria, happiness, Paradise, are in another place, but the others are not yet happy. However, the question for him, is not to “retourner au pays d’où il vient” (*M.* p. 209), since “rien n’y rappelle l’homme” (*M.* p. 210), but to accept the house of humanity, which is not really his, but which he left some time ago, twenty years back (to satisfy the *paraître*) and which is, as Martha puts it, the house “de personne” (*M.* p. 227). Perhaps Jan should not have come, but he has. The lesson for the Son of Man is that he must “apprendre que cette chambre est faite pour qu’on y dorme et ce monde pour qu’on y meure”. The sacrifice must be total. (*M.* p. 223).

This was indeed the reason why Jan had come back, although when he had been asked where it was that he was heading for, he had answered: “Je ne sais pas. Cela dépendra de beaucoup de choses” (*M.* p. 184). To Maria, he had said: “Je n’ai pas besoin d’elles, mais j’ai compris qu’elles devaient avoir besoin de moi” (*M.* p. 174). Camus arranged for his Christ to be trapped and to have His Passion. But before that, the reason for his coming to Europe is clearly pointed out: “J’ai la charge de ma mère et de ma soeur. Je les ai oubliées trop longtemps” (*M.* p. 215). Jan’s role was to come back and not to

make himself known as a *soi*, but to be recognized as a *lui*. If Jan is to be seen as a tragic hero, it is at the level of the *lui* that one must put the question. As a *soi*, he is just a man, and the story tends to lack interest. *Le Malentendu* is then trivial, and one can only expect a few cheap laughs. As a *lui*, Jan has a part to play, which is in no way enhanced by direct explanations. In fact, the public is supposed to grasp what is gradually developed into a replica of the Passion of Christ, with, in the background, La Mère, illustrating mankind and then the Church, and Martha — perhaps Camus himself — the rebellious element within the world, his contemporaries.

Camus wrote elsewhere what ingredients were necessary for the making of a tragedy:

Il y a tragédie lorsque l'homme, par orgueil (ou même par bêtise comme Ajax), entre en contestation avec l'ordre divin, personnifié par un dieu ou incarné par la Société. Et la tragédie sera d'autant plus grande que cette révolte sera plus légitime et cet ordre plus nécessaire<sup>17</sup>.

With Christianity, the parts are turned upside down, and God is crucified. With *Le Malentendu*, one cannot talk of a tragedy in this specific sense. Jan dies of *transparence* and he is aware of the *soi* of humanity which he shares in understanding. The public, however, does not respond to his *lui*, because it is more closely involved with the struggle of Martha and because it refuses in principle the *transparence* of Jan, since it cannot share it with him. *Le Malentendu* is a biblical play, and as was the case with Racine's biblical plays, or even with Giraudoux' *Judith* there is a reluctance on the part of the European public, to recognize its own lack of perception. Here lies another explanation of *Le Malentendu*, since there is a misunderstanding between Camus and his public. His contemporaries were prepared to follow him in rebellion, justly or unjustly as with *Caligula*. They admired his ability for the rational, that Greek compound in the shaping of his mind, but they could not subscribe to his application of the same logic to the development of something they could not understand: the analysis of Jan's *lui*. The character of Caligula, in *Caligula*, expounds the triumph of politics, and men can accept the rule of even a madman, of a Hitler, because, although he is wicked, there is a certain logic which follows the idea of power and they themselves understand what power is. There is no such compulsion emanating from Jan, and a European public will readily recognize the ethos of an *eros* within the progression of which it can situate its own tradition and

<sup>17</sup> In *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles*, Collection La Pléiade, présentée par R. Quillot, Gallimard, 1962.

evolution, but not that of an *agape*. It is incapable of fully perceiving the steady progress (which is non-progression, since there is not twisting) of *transparence*.

If one compares Jan with Giraudoux' Electra, or indeed with Anouilh's Antigone, one discovers that they coincide with Camus' own definition of tragedy. Electra carries with her an "active truth" and proclaims its existence which determines a conflict with Egisthe and society. Similarly Antigone thinks in a straight line and nothing will deter her from following a certain course of action. With Jan, as is the case with Christ, truth appears as something which *is* and which does not need to be proclaimed. One only has to look hard enough to perceive the underlying meaning of a silence<sup>18</sup>. The perpetual state of wrath in which the public find Martha ought to lead them to understand that the modern tragic hero is not Jan but Martha herself. In other words, they, the public, cannot see straight. Indeed there is, with *Le Malentendu*, a complete reversal, and it is because the really tragic hero is *us*, a *soi* incapable of renewing with the other part of himself, a renewal with his *lui*, that this over-intelligent and perceptive play falls short upon a blind audience. This is the really tragic message of Camus' contribution to the understanding of mankind. He goes indeed, somehow farther than Sartre, in so far as, with Sartre, there is no longer any link between *Agape* and *Eros*, between *En-soi* and *Pour-soi*; and as is the case with Nietzsche, God has died. Despite the death of Jan, Jan is not dead. A tired humanity will bear an *absence* at the level of her subconscious, as with a divorce the definition of this exile being, "un divorce entre l'homme et sa vie"<sup>19</sup>. This is all the distance which exists between *L'Exil et le Royaume*.

Camus' work epitomizes not a break with God, as it does with Sartre, but the struggle of Jacob with the Angel. The Hellenic element is at work against the Christian pressure; but although Camus' contemporaries might have wished to see the victory of man in rebellion against the divine, one is not at all sure who exactly started the fight. On the one hand, Camus makes sure that La Mère and Martha murder their God as they have murdered his Prophets before him, but on the other hand there is the aggression of God who wants recognition. However Jan's aggression cannot be aggressive (by definition), and the ways of God cannot be the ways of this world. There is a New Alliance, and when Maria expresses the view that Jan ought to claim his

<sup>18</sup> On silence, see: Charles P. Marie, *La Réalité humaine chez Jean Giraudoux*, La Pensée Universelle, Paris 1975, pp. 93-99.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Gallimard, 1942, p. 18.

kinship — which would mean recognition — she thinks more in terms of what God appeared to be throughout the Old Testament, a dogmatic sort of a God.

As the public ought to know, this approach is no longer acceptable with the coming of the Son of Man. This notwithstanding, there is a confusion for the public who cannot see the two personalities, so to speak, of the Christian hero, the *lui* which is God and the *soi* which is man. Camus' technical devices have been successful in disguising the *lui* aspect, in placing it, as did his contemporaries who constituted his public, at the level of their subconscious which only reveals itself when the mind is in a state of dream, day-dream, or sleep; an element which Bachelard<sup>20</sup> and C.G. Jung<sup>21</sup>, to all intents and purposes, introduced respectively into literary criticism and psychoanalysis and which certain poets (Pierre Emmanuel, for example) find in an open form of imagination. This in a more pedestrian kind of way is not absent from *Le Malentendu* nor from the minds of the audience either. This is in fact when Martha is the closest to Jan: "Mais j'imagine avec délices cet autre pays où l'été écrase tout, où les pluies d'hiver noient les villes et où, enfin, les choses sont ce qu'elles sont (*M.* p. 221). A country where things are what they are. The great utopia which man refuses to accept when it is made available, but which man cannot help striving for.

There is a distance between the *soi* and the *lui*, partial perception and total perception. This is what Pierre Emmanuel qualifies as *l'obscur*<sup>22</sup>, and what Bergson called *zone d'indétermination*<sup>23</sup>. This lack of *transparence* prevents things from being what they are. On the one hand, Sartre and the Existentialists only work from forms and shapes, to which they attribute a meaning, which is human and therefore reasonable if not necessarily realistic, and which they claim is the sum of their acts, consequently themselves. Some people have called this the human condition. On the other hand one has the more diffuse, but no less obvious movements of those who think that essence comes first and that life is a movement from partial perception to full perception.

<sup>20</sup> See amongst others, Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les Rêves, Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*. Librairie José Corti, 1942 and *L'Air et les Songes, Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement*, Librairie José Corti, 1943.

<sup>21</sup> C.G. Jung, *Essai d'Exploration de l'Inconscient*, "Méditations", Editions Gonthier, 1964.

<sup>22</sup> "Le poète se tient dans la zone obscure où se fait l'osmose entre le dedans et le dehors, c'est là que le lecteur doit se situer pour comprendre l'oeuvre." Pierre Emmanuel, *La Révolution parallèle*, Editions du Seuil, 1975, p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> *L'Energie Spirituelle*, Alcan, 1919, p. 13.



This is the claim of the poets<sup>24</sup> and of Christianity. As for Camus' Martha, the character who best accounts for a rebellious humanity in *Le Malentendu*, "Ce que j'ai d'humain n'est pas ce que j'ai de meilleur. Ce que j'ai d'humain, c'est ce que je désire, et pour obtenir ce que je désire, je crois que j'écraserai tout sur mon passage" (*M.* p. 212). *Eros* again, a wish for satisfaction, satisfaction through power which might have been called sin at one of the stages in the development of European civilisation. Recently, educationists have known with the all-too-famous American, Dewey, that emphasis has been placed upon a self-centred education of children, which based its whole ethos on the projection of oneself in an attempt to glean as much power as possible, and from which results the deterioration of certain human qualities which helped in the Classical Age<sup>25</sup> to bridge the *zone d'indétermination* separating the *soi* from the *lui*, *Eros* from *Agape*, and *human condition* from *human nature*.

Camus' work is all the more important in that it stands in this very zone where there is a lack of *transparence*<sup>26</sup>. *Le Malentendu* is a lucid attempt at bridging a gap<sup>27</sup> which has grown wider since human language is no longer capable of stating unequivocally the meaning that was intended: *interpretations* have indeed replaced *exegeses* and things often are only what they appear to be. Camus' own attempt, as has been said of the *langue neutre*<sup>28</sup> of *l'Étranger*, was to show the way for a new form of Classicism, which as Roland Barthes explains: "Dans l'art classique, une pensée toute formée accouche d'une parole qui 'l'exprime', 'la traduit'"<sup>29</sup>.

New developments in the literary field were to justify the increasing notoriety given to the death of God, the death of man and a certain *chosification* walking in its shadow: the Theatre of the Absurd, the Nouveau

<sup>24</sup> See Charles P. Marie, Préface in *Virginia Water*, Editions de l'Athanor, Paris, 1976.

<sup>25</sup> Charles P. Marie, "Sur les Traces d'Alain", in *L'Éducation*, Paris, 2.31.1975.

<sup>26</sup> One of the better examples of *transparence* in contemporary French Literature is to be found in Jean Guirec, *L'Enchantement de la Nuit, L'amitié par le livre*, 1973 (first published by Albin Michel, 1938).

<sup>27</sup> One may read what Denis de Rougemont calls "La Commune Mesure" in *Penser avec les Mains, "Idées"*, Gallimard, 1972 (first published in 1936).

<sup>28</sup> See my own suggestion for a "Langue Essentielle", Charles P. Marie, "La Langue d'Aujourd'hui", in *The Audio-Visual Language Journal*, Vol. 13, no. 3, Birmingham, 1975.

<sup>29</sup> *Le Degré Zéro de l'Écriture*, Editions du Seuil, 1953, p. 49.

Roman, and to a very large extent the French School of Structuralism, of which Michel Foucault was to say, in *Les Mots et Choses*, that it is “La conscience éveillée et inquiète du savoir moderne”<sup>30</sup>. In the same *Les Mots et les Choses*, Michel Foucault speaks of “ce décalage de l’être par rapport à la représentation”<sup>31</sup>, of what is “du vivant” as opposed to “du non-vivant”<sup>32</sup>. With Camus however one is not so far away from the *Logique de Port Royal*, in which the linguistic sign still closely relates “la forme de sa liaison avec ce qui l’*signifi*é”. In other words, the *signifi*ant is not detached from its *signifié*, which gives it a meaning.

It is at this level that an analysis of “form and meaning” in Camus’ *Le Malentendu* becomes really enlightening. One of the keys is perhaps when Maria tells Jan: “On finit par tout brouiller en prenant l’air de ce qu’on n’est pas” (*M.* p. 173). Jan is himself akin to La Mère (his mother) and to Martha (his sister), but they will not know him until they discover his passport identity after his death; and here we might compare the advent of the Christian faith with the Judaic tradition. The path between the *lui* and the *soi* is somewhat obscure, a deficiency of memory which in practice can be assumed as a difference between what *is* and what *appears* to be. Jan is himself, but does not *appear* to be so, since he is not readily recognizable. For him, this experience is very bewildering and it creates the ‘malentendu’. Responding to a shape, to a *signifiant*, both La Mère and Martha will see only a man, and interpret him in terms of his *soi*. Instead of reaching the gist of his *lui*, they will attribute a meaning, a *signifié*, to a form which they wrongly interpret as being someone who will only provide yet more money to help to satisfy the dreams of Martha. In their eyes, the reality of this man is something that will only contribute to their *Eros*, whereas his true meaning is an *Agape*.

But, as we learn, this house, this Inn, this enclosure, this Europe, is “une maison sans ressources pour le coeur” (*M.* p. 195). There is no link, no liaison, no rapport at the heart of the matter, no recognition. Jan is allowed into the Inn as a patron, and no more: in Jan’s words: “Elles m’ont servi la bière que je demandais. Elles me regardaient, elles ne me voyaient pas” (*M.* p. 172). Jan is not meant to expatiate on his *lui*, nor is he allowed to establish a

<sup>30</sup> Gallimard, 1966, p. 221.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

relationship between his guests and himself, at the level of what Bergson called *le moi fondamental*<sup>34</sup>. He is meant to fail, or perhaps to impose, and the latter is not an acceptable tactic. On her side, Martha will refuse to make an exegesis, as opposed to an interpretation, of his *soi*, of his *signifiant*, and by so doing will reject the possibility of finding out his true self, his *lui*. She will condemn in advance the extra meaning which he could have attempted to introduce in his tone of voice, a technique which she knows well from occasionally using it herself, to be able to transform the sense of any communication:

*Martha*: Il me semble quo vous vous obstinez à prendre un ton qui ne devrait pas être le vôtre (*M.* p. 188).

Only the mother will to a certain extent show signs of human kindness, and Jan will thank her for her “accueil” (*M.* p. 197). However, this attitude is not linked with the fact that she is the physical mother of Jan, but results from a kind of intimacy and relaxation which is arrived at as they speak of the past, even if this past is veiled and to a large extent forgotten. Each and every one of us has been through stages, and a historical understanding or indeed display can only help us to circumscribe what is our essence. No human being will wish to reject a chance to feel more of the relationship he has with himself: hence the terms of sympathy which Camus allows between *La Mère* and the *Fils*. But, perception has been decreasing with the mother as she has aged, and she cannot quite remember what it was when she first came to this hotel, this enclosure, this Europe (and perhaps this world):

*Jan*: Vous paraissez bien désabusée. Il y a donc si longtemps que vous habitez cet hôtel?

*La Mère*: Il y a des années et des années de cela. Tellement d'années que je n'en sais plus le commencement et que j'ai oublié ce que j'étais alors. Celle-ci est ma fille (*M.* p. 236).

The mother is now only used to being what her *soi* is. She is tired and she forgets, and the practice of life has had the better over her own identity. She has even forgotten what she was, what her *signifié* was, what her *lui* (or should one say *elle*?) could have been at the beginning: she is in fact prepared to leave this hotel to be something else, at her daughter's fancy. Martha does not belong to a tradition, or at least she desperately refuses it in an attempt to give herself a new *raison d'être* in a day-to-day creation of herself, which is

<sup>34</sup> *Essais sur les Données Immédiates de la Conscience*, p. 127.

very similar to the creative process generated by Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. She creates from a *signifiant*, trying systematically to find her own identity, her own *signifié*, her own 'soleil', her own *raison de'être*, her essence. This is also her tragedy — her search for identity. She goes the wrong way about it. This is why her world is absurd. She has put the cart before the horse, the *signifiant* before the *signifié*, the *soi* before the *lui*: "*Elle est donc perdue*", and Sisyphus is fighting a lost battle. She will probably be absorbed by what Sartre calls "l'organisation" in *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*. She is a heroine of the absurd and in Christian terms what previous generations called "a lost sheep".

After the revelation, when the identity of Jan is clear, the attitude of La Mère is typical of a discovery which is an understanding: "Il suffisait de la douleur pour transformer" (*M.* p. 236). Previously, there had been no recognition, but now the recognition had taken place. It was a source of love as the bridge was at long last established between the mother's *soi* and her *lui* and this was thanks to the support of Jan's *lui*. This love is altogether ethereal and spontaneous.

*La Mère*: Comment pourrais-je me passer de l'amour de mon fils (*M.* p. 23).

His love is right: how can she escape? With Christ and with his Church, there is a death to this world, which is life with Him: "cet amour est assez beau pour moi, puisque je ne peux vivre en dehors de lui" (*M.* p. 235).

Whereas the transformed mother is no longer any good for this world and since she has lost any thought "de révolte", the rebellious child gets a new insight into freedom, which is very different from the free will of the homo existentialist. Again there is a sham, and freedom is here presented under a form of disguise; Martha says of Jan that "il a connu d'autres espaces, la mer, des êtres libres" (*M.* p. 237), so many images of her dreams, but she does not gain the full semantic value of what she says as Jan only is freedom, and there are words which she never managed to pronounce and which she will never pronounce in the future (*M.* p. 238). She remains stubborn and blind, incapable as she is of progressing through the *zone d'indétermination* which for her remains obscure: "Je suis trop loin de ce que j'aime et ma distance est sans remède" (*M.* p. 241). She turns against the mother in hatred, she turns against humanity since humanity is no longer willing to subscribe to her folly. She is then left in exile, a land of exile which is not dissimilar to Sartre's *Huis Clos*:

Moi, j'ai pour ma patrie ce lieu clos et épais où le ciel est sans horizon!  
(*M.* p. 241).

She refuses any form of reconciliation and will try to destroy everything upon which she can have an effect, not providing anything but her own dissatisfaction with herself and her lack of ability to perceive.

Maria and Martha are left on this "terre épaisse" (*M.* p. 252), in this "maison épouvantable" (*M.* p. 253) where no one is allowed to think that 'l'amour n'est pas vain' (*M.* p. 251), where love is a stray impulse and an accident (*M.* p. 251), "car", as Martha puts it: "c'est maintenant que nous sommes dans l'ordre" (*M.* p. 251), and the definition of this order is "celui où personne n'est jamais reconnu" (*M.* p. 251). Martha, who by then has become impassioned, looks for loneliness away from "n'importe quoi qui ressemble à la hideuse tendresse des hommes" (*M.* p. 250), but she cannot estrange herself without attempting to "désespérer" (*M.* p. 251) Maria. She advises her to pray to God: "Priez votre Dieu qu'il vous fasse semblable à une pierre" (*M.* p. 252-253), since the only alternative there is, as she sees it, for human beings is to "rejoindre les autres dans notre maison commune" (*M.* p. 253), away from any ideal principle about life.

*Martha:* Vous avez à choisir entre le bonheur stupide des cailloux et le lit gluant où nous vous attendons. (*M.* p. 253).

Then appears *Le Vieux*, who, like Martha and Camus at this stage and place in *Le Malentendu*, is negative: he refuses to help. The remaining characters are too obsessed with their own problems to be able or to wish to help. They are individuals in rebellion, whose philosophy or lack of philosophy prevents any charitable action. We should needs have recourse to Rieux, to hear of a satisfactory humanist solution to the problems raised, but he belongs to *La Peste* and not to *Le Malentendu*. With *Le Malentendu*, man is left alone, but there is a hope even for the hero of the absurd, he only has to join the mother instead of holding out for a personal solution which he knows is not. His tragedy is in his estrangement. Camus, however, adds to the confusion in shaping *Le Vieux*, who is seen as God himself, but who had been introduced as an old servant, probably the godly image of the hero of the absurd. In *Le Malentendu*, Camus certainly likes playing with the *Signifiants*, but it is like playing blind-man's buff: one is not totally sure of the identity of the characters, of the semantic values of the *Signifiés*.

What matters I think, in this play, is the theme, which is an attempt at presenting the Christian Revelation to a public whose preoccupations are far removed from it, and this by means of its negation. It is not surprising that Camus experienced a failure when this play was produced. His exegesis, however, is the opposite of a failure. It is in fact a great success in so far as he managed to relate the two parts that form any individual, the *soi* and the *lui*,

and also re-established for the stage a link between the Christian *Agape* and the Hellenic *Eros*, a link which is always vulnerable ... but this is the History of the Western Civilisation. In *Le Malentendu*, language is also linked with truth in an attempt to re-establish an essentialist rapport between the world of meanings and that of forms ... Our own method in approaching literary criticism<sup>35</sup> has also helped, we hope, in clarifying things which to some are obvious but which do not seem to enter into other interpretations.

<sup>35</sup> Other essays: Charles P. Marie, "Le Sceptre et le Balancier" (a study of Gaullism) in *Espoir* (Revue de l'Institut Charles de Gaulle), No. 14, Plon, March 1976, and "La Tour du Pin et le Rayon Limpide", in *Fer de Lance* (numéro spécial 100), Cannes, December 1977. "Giraudoux et l'idée de mesure nationale", in *Cahiers Jean Giraudoux*, Grasset, 1978.