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VALERIE P MINOGUE

TRIALS OF LIFE

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UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA

TRIALS OF LIFE

an Inaugural Lecture

delivered at the University College of Swansea

on 2 November, 1982

by

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Mr Principal, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The very first woman to be appointed to a University Chair in Great Britain was Mary Rhys Williams, appointed here in Swansea to the Chair of Modern Languages, as it then was, in June, 1921. Here is another woman, and there are regrettably few of us in University Chairs, so Swansea is again making a significant - though in this case rather small! - contribution to egalitarianism.

Professor Williams occupied the Chair, which in 1932 became the Chair of French, until her retirement in 1948. I never had the good fortune to meet her, but I know of her important contributions to Arthurian and Medieval Studies, and have gathered a vivid impression of her career and vitality.[1] My more immediate predecessors, Roy Knight and Armel Diverres are, I am very happy to say, here this evening. Roy Knight held the Chair from 1950 till 1974,[2] and during this time the Department became, by the inclusion of Italian and Spanish, the Department of Romance Studies. It flourished from 1974 till 1981 in the sure hands of Armel Diverres.[3] I hope my predecessors will bear patiently with me while I say how deeply conscious I am of the very high standards of scholarship, personal kindness and effective devotion to the cause of French Studies they have set me. When I consider the international reputation and achievements of my predecessors, I feel the more acutely the responsibility, as well as the great privilege, of being appointed their successor.

The affection and esteem in which Professor Knight and Professor Diverres are held in this college and in the world of French Studies at large, so speak for themselves as to make it presumptuous for a newcomer like me to pay them tribute on this score. I should like however to express my admiration for their achievements and my personal debt to them for their help and friendship.

It is a particular pleasure to me to be in a Department in which three related languages and literatures work together. It is also a particular pleasure to be back in my native South Wales. I greatly enjoyed my many happy years in Queen Mary College, London, but I am glad to be home, and I should like to thank the friends and colleagues who have made me even gladder.

The first part of this lecture to be composed was the title. It had that useful attribute for a looming public lecture of providing a relatively non-committal and elastic frame. My general aim however was clear to me then, even if, as I now advance upon it, it seems rather less so. The hobby-horse I have chosen to saddle for this inaugural ride is my unoriginal but deep conviction of the importance of literature in our understanding of ourselves and our lives. I have most recently been working on the contemporary French novel, and I am about to embark on a study of a nineteenth-century novel but I shall not, this evening, discourse on any specialist field. I shall roam where my subject leads me, and hope I shan't get fined for trespassing.

But it's time I explained my non-committal and elastic title. It alludes to the view that a serious novel is, in a sense, a trial

of life, an examination of the human world, with or without explicit verdict. The case is often adjourned, but the individuals we encounter in the novel become, whatever their uniqueness or eccentricity, representatives of mankind. As readers, we judge them and the world they inhabit; and by analogy, judge ourselves and our world. The writer, through the organisation of form and the selection and arrangement of words, will influence that judgement. But this does not mean that the writer asks us, in the name of known laws and agreed criteria, to make approvals and condemnations. Rather it is the mark of seriousness and a sign of greatness, to make trial also of the reader's judgement - indeed to put our laws, criteria and yardsticks to the test. The very language of our judgement, with its inherent assumptions, classifications and categories finds itself on trial, and the interaction between the writer's judgement and our own may lead to reappraisals of our experience and the language in which we express it. You may object that in fiction's imaginative orbit we may stray far from the world of our experience. Yet the very form and nature of fiction's alternative universes - from Dante's Divina Commedia to Swift's Lilliput, or Orwell's 1984 (now nearly with us) present a critique of the universe we inhabit. They work on our conduct and judgements, though we should remember that, as Proust put it, 'one of the great and wonderful points about fine books (one that should make us understand the part at once essential and limited that reading can play in our spiritual life) is that for the author they could be called "Conclusions" and for the reader 'Incitements'.[4] We could say they begin for the reader where they stop for the writer.

For my purposes, the imaginary trial is a particularly useful focus, for it concentrates on the processes of human judgement, and highlights the reader's complex role as a juror, divided between the judge and the accused. The fictional trial explores the rules of human conduct and the relation of an individual or group to an established order. The group in the first of the trials I propose to discuss is a large one - nothing less than the human race itself, standing trial in the person of the narrator of Cyrano de Bergerac's 17th-century tale of a journey to the States and Empires of the Moon and Sun.[5] The established order by which the trial is conducted is another species altogether, for he is in the Kingdom of the Birds.

The human prisoner is befriended by a magpie who recommends mercy towards one who may, after all, be endowed with Reason like the Birds themselves. The idea, however, that a clawless, beakless, featherless creature might be possessed of Reason and even a soul, is naturally greeted with derision (195). In an effort to escape guilt for the crimes of men, this representative of humanity claims he is really a monkey - snatched from his monkey-mother's arms, and corrupted by human education (196). He does not get away with this, but the birds try hard to be fair, even adjourning the trial when bad weather threatens to affect the mood of the judges (198). The arrival of an eagle highlights the conceptual gulf between human and feathered, for the man at once takes the eagle to be their king. This mistake, the friendly magpie explains, is a natural result of men's understanding of kingship; but where men choose the strongest and most cruel, the

birds choose the weakest and most gentle. Their current king is a dove (200-201).

In the court of the birds, Man's claims are ridiculed and his wickedness exposed, though his presumed lack of intelligence is taken as a mitigating factor. Certain crimes, however, do seem to indicate mens rea - a guilt nicely pinpointed in Hitchcock's famous film, where a protest of 'What have we ever done to annoy the birds?' is instantly followed by an order for 'Two French-fried and chicken'! The prisoner is sentenced to Birdland's most terrible death - 'la mort triste', in which he will be forced to listen to sad voices like the nightingale's, until he dies of melancholy. This, however, is 'mercifully' commuted into being eaten alive by flies, fleas, and bees (208). Our hero is saved only by a parrot met on earth, who had heard him say that birds must be endowed with intelligence. For this he is pardoned and freed. This trial mocks Man's supposed dominion: the birds'-eye-view sees the human hierarchy as evidence of Man's innate servility, Man's claims to immortality as a delusion of human pride, his belief in God merely a further example of his thirst for a master's authority. Poetic raptures on nightingales are ridiculed in 'la mort triste', while the supposedly merciful alternative (and Cyrano spares no detail of how exquisite the torment will be) clearly indicates a certain relativity of taste. Even while we tremble for the hero and sympathise with his plight, we are persuaded to notice the ambiguities of the case. A bird, we may reflect, or indeed any species other than our own, would get short shrift in a human court, where even our own kind may sometimes have cause for complaint. Cyrano leads us into peril with a man with whom, as fellow-humans, we can scarcely fail to identify, then disturbs us by giving telling arguments to the other side. Whatever our assumptions and convictions, belief or unbelief, we are here 'incited' to re-examine them, to discard or reaffirm.[6]

Turning now to a less general trial, that of Julien Sorel, in Stendhal's Le Rouge et le noir,[7] we see the confrontation of an individual and a specific social order. Julien is a young man from the provinces - one of many such in nineteenth-century fiction - who leaves his peasant background to make his way in the world. When he seems on the point of achieving his goals (a wealthy marriage, a title, an assured future) he is denounced by a letter from his first love, Madame de Rênal, who, prompted by her priest, declares him a hypocrite, an unbeliever, a seducer who uses women to climb the social ladder. The letter offers Julien a picture of himself which is uncomfortably close to the truth yet utterly intolerable. In a state of shock he drives to Verrières and shoots Mme de Rênal as she stands in church. He wounds her but not gravely. This is the crime for which he is tried.

There is a complex irony at work here, for Stendhal persuades us that Julien is never quite the hypocrite he tries to be. His hypocrisy is itself hypocritical. It is, to distort a well-known phrase, a tribute paid by virtue[8] to the vice of a corrupt society. Julien's impulsive and reckless crime, for all its violence, unmasks the reality of a man who reacts not with the calculations of self-interest but spontaneously, with a kind of heroic rage. We see Julien in many lights - a ruthless pursuer of what he conceives to be his duty to himself, and a tender, timid, vulnerable soul.

He is a criminal who denounces his own ambition and crime, but he is also the focus for Stendhal's romantic nostalgia for an extravagant sixteenth-century style of heroism, and thus a 'heroic rebel' in a non-heroic world of vain and hypocritical men whose sole passions are vanity and money.

When Julien, in his address to the jury, asks no pardon but demands the death-sentence, the sixteenth-century side of him condemns the hypocrite and social climber formed in the nineteenth-century climate - and simultaneously condemns his judges. He presents himself as a representative of 'that class of young men who, born in a lower class, and oppressed by poverty, have the good fortune to acquire a good education, and the audacity to mix with what the pride of the rich calls Society' (482). By this aggressive speech Julien denounces the scheming prelates, politicos and lawyers, and himself takes command of his trial and sentence. He had already drawn on the rigid language of the law to tell his examining magistrate decisively: 'Article 1342 of the Penal Code is clear: I deserve death and await it' (452)[9]. As with Man and Birds, accusers and accused meet in a confrontation of conflicting languages. The 'mercy' of the birds is no mercy to Man, and the Penal Code does not represent the experience of Julien Sorel. Yet he appropriates it to the service of his personal code, while rejecting the social order it serves.[10]

The verdict predictably goes against Julien, but by a typically Stendhalian paradox, it is the court and all it stands for that is ultimately condemned. Honour, love and poetry are clearly, in Stendhal's view, on Julien's side. But Julien is no simple hero, nor does Stendhal offer a simplistic view of him as a 'victim of society'. We cannot always applaud Julien's concept of his duty to himself, nor are his love-affairs approvable in conventional terms, but he stands out boldly against the background of Stendhal's vision of French society in the 1830s, as a man of passion and daring, frightening and touching by turns. Stendhal means us to see the court as quite another species. They might as well be birds. Their language with its pomposities and cant, its hierarchy of values in which money reigns supreme, is quite alien to Julien's language of question and passion.

The ideal of passion and spontaneity, sacrificed by Julien to survival in an ignoble world, is salvaged at the last when, after his death, Stendhal heaps honours on his head. Quite literally, since Julien's intended bride, Mathilde de la Mole, buries his head with all the ceremony once accorded by Queen Marguerite de Navarre to her beheaded lover, Boniface de la Mole, Mathilde's distant ancestor. Julien thus acquires posthumously the halo of a sixteenth-century heroic figure, while Madame de Rênal, the true passion of Julien's heart, dies of grief three days after his execution, giving an ultimate tribute to the nineteenth-century figure of the poor young man. Stendhal ensures that his hero, though taken from reality,[11] surpasses reality, and achieves a posthumous if problematic radiance, as the fallen angel of a heroic ideal. More than a century later, Julien's trial and execution still provoke the reader to ponder on life's inequalities, the ambiguities of human conduct, and the conflict between personal imperatives and the established code of the law.

The next trial may be more familiar. It mocks the entire process of law, though it initiates us carefully into legal terminology. The whole apparatus of the court is indeed ridiculed by the nature of the felony - the theft of a plate of tarts. The prisoner is of course the Knave of Hearts, in Alice in Wonderland.[12] It is Alice's first experience of a courtroom, and she was, we are told, 'quite pleased to find she knew the name of nearly everything there'. Between name and reality, however, there is a certain gap:

> 'And that's the jury-box' thought Alice, 'and those twelve creatures' (she was obliged to say 'creatures' you see, because some of them were animals, and some were birds) 'I suppose they are the jurors.'

The judge is identified by his great wig. The jurymen take notes, as jurymen are meant to do, but they start before anything has happened. They are writing their names, the Gryphon explains, 'for fear they should forget them before the end of the trial.' 'Stupid things' says Alice, and the jurors write that down too. When Alice removes the squeaky pencil of one of the jurors, 'he was obliged to write with one finger for the rest of the day; and this was of very little use, as it left no mark on the slate.' He continues, in fact, to go through the motions of his appointed function. It is the function of the Judge to declare 'Consider your verdict', and this he does, but with so little discretion that he has to be held in check by the White Rabbit, so that other proceedings may proceed. The calling of witnesses, for instance. Three blasts on a trumpet lend some pomp to this ceremony, but certain oddities soon become apparent. The Duchess' cook, for instance, comes in with her pepper-pot, and when Alice herself is called, greatly to her surprise, to give evidence, she happens to be growing, and tips over the jury-box when she jumps up. The first witness, the Hatter, appears with tea-cup in one hand and bread and butter in the other. The familiar process of questioning witnesses about dates and times revolves around the problem of when the Hatter began his tea. The various dates suggested are written down by the jurors, and to emphasise the meaninglessness of this procedure, we learn that they then added them up and 'reduced the answer to shillings and pence.' Much, in a sense, what Julien Sorel's jury does!

The eccentricities of legal jargon provide much sport. The Hatter, when told he may 'stand down', explains 'I can't go no lower...I'm on the floor as it is'. 'Then you may sit down' the King replies. As this witness leaves, the Queen offers her universal solution, instructing one of the officers to 'take his head off outside', but the Hatter sensibly disappears. The constant threat of execution from the Queen is both irrational and ineffectual for we are in a world where vocabulary and ceremony have no meeting-point with reality. The questioning of Alice by the King spotlights the gap between formalities and meaningfulness:

> 'What do you know about this business?' the King said to Alice.
> 'Nothing' said Alice.
> 'Nothing whatever?' persisted the King.
> 'Nothing whatever' said Alice.
> 'That's very important' the King said, turning to the jury.

> They were just begining to write this down on their slates, when the White Rabbit interrupted: 'Unimportant, your Majesty means, of course' he said in a very respectful tone, but frowning and making faces at him as he spoke.
> 'Unimportant, of course, I meant' the King hastily said, and went on to himself in an undertone, 'important - unimportant - unimportant - important' as if he were trying which word sounded best.
> Some of the jury wrote it down 'important' and some 'unimportant'. Alice could see this, as she was near enough to look over their slates; 'but it doesn't matter a bit' she thought to herself. (113-4)

The very question of significance or non-significance is itself made meaningless. Great importance is however attached to the reading of a document which turns out to be a set of nonsense verses. The document is not signed, nor is it written in the prisoner's handwriting; but as the question of its relevance is never examined, these facts become indications of guilt.[13] '"If you didn't sign it" says the King, "that only makes the matter worse."' In vain does the logical Alice protest that the document proves nothing, that there's not an atom of meaning in it...

When stumped, the King goes back to the bit of procedure he's sure of: 'Let the jury consider their verdict'. This however elicits from the Queen 'Sentence first - verdict afterwards.' Such a flagrant contradiction of reason draws from Alice a cry of 'Stuff and nonsense' which in turn produces the inevitable shout of 'Off with her head'...'"Who cares for you?" said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.) "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"'[14]Alice here calls the whole bluff, and thrusts reality into this make-believe world of gesture and performance:

> At this the whole pack rose up into the air, and came flying down upon her; she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off...

Now, however, Alice wakes up and the dream that briefly touched on nightmare dissolves into the comfortable reality of Alice asleep on a grassy bank, with her sister brushing away some dead leaves from her face. But the trial of the Knave of Hearts makes it clear that the names and functions of things and persons, the performance of procedures, and the utterance of formal phrases are all farcical unless there is agreement on their meaning and purpose. Alice's topsy-turvy world shows the disjunction between language and reality in a world where the normal rules of logic fail to apply, though this in a sense only intensifies a disjunction between accused and accusers that is of the essence of any trial. The Wonderland trial makes an illuminating backcloth for the next two I wish to consider, though their atmosphere is quite other, and they do not have happy endings.

In Kafka's world - the world of Joseph K. in The Trial[15], all the normal rules of a trial are broken. The novel opens with K.'s arrest, significantly enough on his birthday - significantly, since it is his right to life that becomes the issue. No charge is laid against him, and when K. asks what he is being arrested for, an air of sweet reasonableness informs the outrageously unreasonable

answer: 'We are not authorized to tell you that. Go to your room and wait there. Proceedings have been instituted against you, and you will be informed of everything in due course. I am exceeding my instructions in speaking freely to you like this' (9). K. moves from thinking the whole thing an elaborate practical joke to protesting against the whole grotesque happening: '"But how can I be under arrest? And particularly in such a ridiculous fashion?" "So now you're beginning it all over again?" said the warder, dipping a slice of bread and butter into the honey-pot' (11-12). Is this reality? - or an absurd dream like Alice's Hatter? K. clutches at normality like a drowning man - he will get his papers and demand to see a warrant. '"What are your papers to us?" cried the tall warder. "You're behaving worse than a child."' The position of K. faced by an authority impervious to reason is indeed worse than that of a child baffled by rules and a logic he cannot grasp. (Is Kafka suggesting that this is Man's position? Born guilty, and condemned to death by a blind irrational force?) When K. declares he does not know the law which decrees his arrest, he is in much the same position as the Knave of Hearts declaring he did not sign the nonsensical document. His ignorance incriminates him. 'He admits that he doesn't know the Law and yet he claims he's innocent'(13) comments one of the warders, standing logic on its head like the King in Wonderland. K. now faces an interrogation: '"You are presumably very surprised at the events of this morning?" asked the Inspector, with both hands rearranging the few things that lay on the night-table, a candle and a matchbox, a book and a pincushion, as if they were objects which he required for his interrogation'(17). The objects seem momentarily to become 'exhibits' in a judicial procedure - are they important? unimportant? or is the question itself meaningless? K. answers that he is surprised but not very. 'Not very surprised?' asks the inspector and proceeds to rearrange the objects on the table. When K. acknowledges that he now does not think the whole thing a joke, the Inspector says 'Quite right', and investigates the matchbox to see how many matches it contains... A search for clues, or a meaningless gesture of boredom?

Later, the Inspector gives K. a piece of helpful advice: 'don't make such an outcry about your feeling innocent, it spoils the not unfavourable impression you make in other respects'(19). We can but sympathise when K. later cries: 'What kind of man are you, then? You ask me to be sensible and you carry on in the most senseless way imaginable yourself'(19). He is indeed in a senseless world.[16]

K.'s first public interrogation is to be on a Sunday, but he is not told where, nor at what time. Having heard from one of the warders that a particular attraction exists between guilt and the Law, K. assumes he is somehow bound to find the court. And he does - despite the lack of any obvious compulsion to do so, and despite very implausible methods of looking for it. But the court is not at all like a court. It is a sort of meeting-hall, with a gallery so low that people cannot stand up straight (shades of Alice again!) A fat little man announces that K. is late. 'Whether I am late or not, I am here now', K. replies, and gets a burst of applause (47). He then has to climb onto the platform, and, we are told, 'the crowd behind him was so great that he had to brace himself to keep from knocking the Examining Magistrate's table and

perhaps the Examining Magistrate himself off the platform.' Alice, we remember, tipped over the jury-box. It seems the collision between the individual and the supposed 'order' quite literally threatens the stability of the Law...

The interrogation begins with the Magistrate consulting what looks like a filthy old exercise-book, and saying: '"Well then...you are a house-painter?" "No", said K., "I'm the junior manager of a large Bank"' (48). This causes an outburst of laughter, though we may well ask whether these descriptive labels mean anything, anyway. Emboldened by this early success, K. proceeds to ridicule the proceedings. This, he claims, is only a trial if he chooses to recognise it as such, and this, for the moment, he chooses to do, though only on grounds of compassion. Perhaps a trial is only ever a trial in so far as the accused is prepared to recognise it as such, for it is a matter of an external code recognised and confronted by an individual with his own irreducible language and experience. If the code is not recognised, there is no common language in which the two can meet. Cyrano's narrator provisionally accepts the code of the birds, and uses, in his defence, arguments adapted to their criteria; Julien Sorel appropriates the code, while rejecting the order it serves, and the poor Knave of Hearts accepts the inconsequences of which he forms part. For Joseph K., the trial seems, at this point, a game he provisionally agrees to play.

Though he receives no further summons, K. himself decides he is expected to appear the following Sunday, but when he reaches the Courts, he finds them empty. He wanders about, loses his way, turns faint in the stuffy air,[17] but at last gets out. He cannot, however, leave it all behind so easily. The Bank, formerly a haven from the grotesque machinery of the Law, is no longer exempt from its intrusions, and his family also becomes involved. The further K. proceeds, the further off the higher officials seem to be, and the more totally obsessed K. becomes with his trial. It no longer seems laughable or contemptible, and certainly no game. K. learns that innocence is irrelevant: the only possible outcome is ostensible acquittal (which in no way means actual acquittal) or else postponement. The Court can never be shifted from its conviction of the guilt of the accused. K.'s trial strikingly manifests the disparity between lived reality and a conventional order of language governed by a preposterous logic. It dramatises Man's uneasy accommodation to the concepts of guilt and innocence, and reminds us that whatever the verdict may be, the sentence of death, for Man, is inevitable and universal. The Queen of Hearts was right. 'Sentence first, verdict afterwards'. K. finally goes quietly with the two gentlemen who lead him to his death, knowing he has been left, as he puts it, 'to say to myself all that is needed' (248).[18] His failure to defend himself, his complicity with the Law, his acquiescence in guilt, his lack of sufficient attachment to living,[19] all seem at the last to disgust him. The Law has stripped him of humanity, as indeed he had earlier anticipated when he observed the humiliation of another accused man: 'The client ceased to be a client and became the Advocate's dog. If the Advocate were to order this man to crawl under the bed as if into a kennel and bark there, he would obey the order' (214). When at the last the knife is turned in K.'s heart, all he does say to himself is 'Like a dog', and the narrator adds: 'it was as if

he meant the shame to outlive him.' In these final words of Kafka's novel it does indeed outlive him, provoking disturbing reflections.

Kafka's _Trial_ had (and has) a considerable impact on his readers, and among them, many writers. One was Camus, whose trial of Meursault in _L'Etranger_ owes a great deal to his predecessor, though this novel is very different.[20] There is a moment in Kafka's novel when K. protests: 'But I am not guilty...And if it comes to that, how can any man be called guilty? We are all simply men here, one as much as the other'(232). It is as if Camus had taken off from that point. Meursault acknowledges that we are never totally faultless - 'On est toujours un peu fautif' (32) - but he rejects the pattern of guilt and remorse which is thrust at him. Both these novels are focused on the question of human guilt or innocence, and the lack of absolute criteria of judgement. Though the nature of K.'s offence is never clear, he accepts guilt: the nature of Meursault's offence _is_ clear - the killing of an Arab boy, though it happens in a moment of total confusion and bewilderment in the blinding light and shattering heat of the sun on the beach. Meursault accepts being legally guilty but does not experience inward guilt, as K. does.

The workings of the Law in Kafka are clearly scandalous and disorderly, while Camus presents a familiar and recognisable legal world, even if he does rig the case against Meursault. Camus seems to suggest that in a world from which the notion of Sin is banished, the principal offence is that of not conforming to the accepted social order. He rigs the trial in such a way that it is for this that Meursault is condemned to death.[21] Meursault refuses to trade in the common currency of accepted values and ideas, and thus rejects the very language of the social order. The nature and degree of his crime (accident? self-defence? manslaughter? murder?) is submerged in the hostility provoked by his refusal of social conventions. Since it is Meursault himself who is the supposed narrator, we receive events in the language of Meursault, and through this medium, encounter the language of the outside world, perceiving it therefore as alien.

By making Meursault an apparently dispassionate figure who never seeks to justify himself, and who reports events in terms of causes rather than motives, Camus is able to play an interesting trick on the reader. He implicitly invites us to start judging Meursault from the very first page of the novel. The first words we read (I shall translate them quite literally, though it will sound odd) are these: 'Today Mother died. Or perhaps yesterday. I don't know. I received a telegram from the Home: "Mother deceased. Burial tomorrow. Distinguished sentiments." That means nothing. Perhaps it was yesterday.' Meursault then goes on immediately to plan his journey to the Old People's Home next day. On this basis, readers may be tempted to regard Meursault as an unfeeling brute. Many critics, indeed, have presented Meursault as an insensitive unthinking brute who implausibly changes character and finds an expressive voice towards the end of the novel.[22] This is not, however, a view that stands up to careful reading. But readers, like jurors, are sometimes liable to leap to conclusions if an individual fails to make the conventional appeals to sympathy. Not knowing whether his mother died today or yesterday

<u>might</u> indicate indifference, but the telegram offers no clue as to the time of her death. The comment: 'That means nothing' <u>might</u> refer to the contents of the telegram, or might equally well refer to the 'distinguished sentiments' that accompany the news. What damns Meursault is his refusal to solicit sympathy, and failure to express emotional reactions.[23]

It is worth looking closely at the first few pages. When Meursault asks for two days off for the funeral, his boss looks displeased, so Meursault says 'It's not my fault'. Then he thinks he should not have said that. It was not a matter for apology, but rather for the boss to offer condolences. He will no doubt do so later, when Meursault is in mourning, but for the moment, Meursault reflects (and he does a great deal of reflecting), it is as if his mother were not dead at all. After the funeral, everything will seem more official. One sees, through Meursault's eyes, a yawning gap between immediate reality and the categories of social discourse. If Meursault were really brutish and indifferent, why go to the funeral at all? Why borrow a black tie and armband? But his whole conduct at this time will later be examined in court, and if, in the opening pages, we judge and condemn, Camus will make us feel pretty uncomfortable later on, when we see how each circumstance is used against Meursault in the paradoxically blinding light of the courtroom. On reaching the Home, Meursault asks to see his mother but is told he has to see the Warden first (9). When at last he gets to the coffin, the concierge offers to reopen it so that Meursault can see her. Suddenly Meursault stops him. 'Don't you want to?' asks the concierge. 'No' Meursault replies, and once more thinks he should not have said that, showing again his distrust of social exchanges. 'Why?' asks the concierge: 'I don't know' comes the answer. 'I understand' says the concierge and sits and chats with him (12).[24] The understanding expressed by the concierge causes no amazement in the reader, though later, Meursault's conduct on this occasion will be regarded as incomprehensible and inhuman. When offered supper, Meursault says he is not hungry, but accepts some coffee. Then he wants a cigarette, but hesitates: 'I didn't know whether I could, in front of Mother. I reflected on it: it was of no importance.' So he smokes with the concierge. These banal events become, in the trial, an indictment of Meursault as a man of total insensibility and a criminal heart. He refused to see his mother's body, and sat beside her coffin, drinking coffee and smoking...Yet these things could have been seen in a sympathetic light if presented in a socially acceptable form.

He is asked whether he felt grief on the day of the funeral, and replies with difficulty. He loved his mother, he says, but that didn't mean anything, because most people (and this scandalises his questioner) had, at some time, more or less wished for the death of those they loved. He adds, with further damaging honesty, that as he was very tired that day, he did not entirely realise what was happening. But he can say with certainty that he would have preferred his mother not to die (96). This bare and searching truthfulness is not what is required. His certainty about his preference makes no impression. He is supposed to say - the words are offered him - that he had 'mastered his natural feelings'. But he will not accept the offered formula. His counsel warns him that people from the Home may be called as

witnesses against him. When Meursault replies that this has nothing to do with the case, the counsel remarks, in a phrase reminiscent of Kafka, that it is clear he has no experience of the Law. Throughout his interrogations, Meursault is questioned on his feelings and beliefs rather than his acts. The question of how he came to be holding a gun never arises, though in fact he took it away from his companion, Sintès, to stop him shooting the Arab. On feelings and beliefs, Meursault has little to say. He has lived from day to day on an immediate and physical level, avoiding all truck with the abstractions and conventional attitudes appropriate to a fully-paid-up-member of society.

In the court-room he sees a row of faces staring at him and recognises them as the jury. But, as in Wonderland, the name does not match the reality. They look more like passengers in a bus, looking at a newcomer to find something odd to laugh at. Meursault reflects that this is a foolish notion: it is crime they are looking for. And yet...it seems eventually to be Meursault's oddity that <u>is</u> the focus of attention. Meursault has the curious impression of being an intruder, a person extraneous to events in the court.[25] Among the journalists he notices one, less indifferent than the rest, gazing at him intently, and has the odd impression of being looked at by himself. The very brief description of the journalist fits quite well a description of Camus himself, who had often sat in the press-box in Algiers courts, and who had also used the pen-name Meursault on several occasions. It is as though Camus had put himself on both sides - in the observing public in the shape of the reporter, and in the prisoner Meursault.[26]

Céleste, Meursault's landlord and friend, speaks inarticulately on his behalf - he too has no command of public language: the essence of his statement is that Meursault is a man. When asked what he means, he replies that everybody knows. Through him, Camus indicates that it is indeed man who is on trial, but man dehumanised in the eyes of other men. Meursault is now simply 'the accused' and is told to be quiet, though he reflects that being 'the accused' is quite important. But the case proceeds without him. His girlfriend Marie becomes 'the mistress of the accused'. Public vocabulary invades and engulfs private reality. The prosecutor insists that Meursault is outside society, that his heart is not human, and therefore he has no right to human compassion. Meursault is in fact redefined as a monster. His totally inadequate explanation of why he committed the crime (that it was because of the sun) simply provokes laughter. His depersonalisation, even nullification, reaches an extreme point when his defence counsel speaks in Meursault's name, in the first person, as if replacing him. The individual is silenced. Only the public voice is heard. Finally 'the accused' learns he will be decapitated in the name of the French people.

From this time on, he is caught up in a relentless mechanism. He comforts himself with the thought that since death is inevitable, the question of <u>when</u> is less important, but he reasserts himself, his own view of life, and his rejection of the notions of sin and redemption. He feels at one with what he calls 'the tender indifference of the world', and his one hope is that on the day of his execution there will be spectators to greet him with

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cries of hate. This would give meaning and humanity to a death that otherwise seems merely a mathematical progression. Whatever our final view of Meursault, Camus provokes us, or 'incites' us, as Proust put it, to re-examine the instant judgements that often pop out in response to a pennyworth of language in the slot.

In presenting the novel here as a trial of life, I have used these imaginary trials (on which there is so vastly more that should be said) to focus on some of the ways in which novels draw us in to the processes of judgement and correct the tendency of language to reinforce convention in speech and thought. The imaginary trial embodies the collision of public language and private experience, and sets the reader at the centre of that collision. As we read, we are a jury, shifting this way and that, in what becomes ultimately a trial of our own judgement and language. Such involvement makes us more aware of the complexities and ambiguities of human conduct, and less inclined to be passive spectators in the court of life. It reminds us we are the prisoner as well as the jury and the judge.

In this way Literature plays an important and active role in the endless and necessary conflict between the public affirmation of human values and the hesitations of humility, between the conventions of language and the often inarticulate eccentricities of inward experience. In all the trials we have considered, whatever the questions posed or conclusions reached, they all lead us to an overwhelming question: What does it mean to be human? That - I use the phrase here with no irony - is a good question. It is the business of the critic and teacher to mediate, interpret, analyse, but also to keep the language of criticism in contact with the discourse of mankind and thus make sure that question continues to be heard.

Mr Principal, Ladies and Gentlemen, my case rests. In its own small way, an inaugural lecture is also one of the trials of life. As the Queen of Hearts *might* have said: 'Sentences first, verdict afterwards.' There have been *lots* of sentences...I hope the verdict will not be 'Off with her head!'

NOTES

Numbers in brackets in the text are page references to the five works discussed in the editions cited below.

1. Notably from the warm and lively tribute to her composed by my immediate predecessor, Professor Emeritus Armel Diverres, the then British President, later International President of the International Arthurian Society. In *Bulletin Bibliographique de la Société Internationale Arthurienne*, vol.XXX, Paris, 1978, pp. 253-255.

2. The address delivered by Professor F W George, in *Two Speeches delivered at the Presentation of a Festschrift to Professor R C Knight, 7 September, 1977*, printed by University College, Swansea, 1977, testifies more amply than I can do here both to Professor Emeritus Roy Knight's eminence as a scholar and teacher, and to the affection he continues to inspire. So indeed does the Festschrift itself - *The Classical Tradition in French Literature*, London, 1977. An appreciative tribute from Professor H M Waidson also marks Roy Knight's retirement in *University College of Swansea: Fifty-fourth Report of the Council* (1973-4) 145-6.

3. Professor Diverres' work and achievements in the college, in this country, and abroad, are eloquently outlined in Dr C J Gossip's tribute in *University College of Swansea: Sixty-first Report of the Council* (1980-81), 125-6. A Festschrift in honour of Professor Diverres is now nearing completion.

4. Marcel Proust, 'Days of Reading' in *Essays on Language and Literature*, ed. J L Hevesi, London, 1947, 44. The original French text, which first formed part of Proust's preface to his translation of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, is collected under the title 'Journées de Lecture' in *Pastiches et Mélanges*, Gallimard, Paris, 1919, (225-272), p. 248.

5. Cyrano de Bergerac, *L'Autre Monde ou Les états et empires de la Lune et du Soleil*, ed. F. Lachèvre, Classiques Garnier, Paris, 1932, 194-213.

6. J S Spink, in *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire*, London, 1960, p.53, comments on the way Cyrano uses the techniques of the 'philosophical novel' - later used by Montesquieu, Swift, Voltaire, and others - to 'pass off serious thinking as harmless fantasy'.

7. Stendhal, *Le rouge et le noir*, ed. H Martineau, Classiques Garnier, 1969, 451-508. The translations are mine.

8. A better word here would be the Italian *virtú*, in the sense of 'ability' or 'potential': this sense is highlighted in a reflection of Julien's in his death-cell: 'Moi seul, je sais ce que j'aurais pu faire...Pour les autres, je ne suis tout au plus qu'un PEUT-ETRE.' (487). (Only I know what I might have achieved...For the rest of the world, I am at most only a PERHAPS.)

9. As Henri Martineau (after A Paupe, *La vie littéraire de Stendhal*, Paris, 1914) points out on p.592, a certain poetic

licence is here at work, despite the apparent precision. The penal Code of 1810 contained only 484 articles!

10. Julien reflects, for instance, that the rascally Valenod who has condemned him, is, apart from Julien's one act of violence, a hundred times more harmful to society. (499)

11. For a detailed account of the original (Antoine Berthet) on whom Julien Sorel was based, see René Fonvielle, Le véritable Julien Sorel, 1971. While Le rouge, with its base in 'real life', may seem remote from the fantasy world of Lewis Carroll, Dodgson's 'trial' may also have resulted from contact with 'real life', as these remarks by Roger Lancelyn Green would suggest: 'The elongation of the Trial of the Knave of Hearts from one page to two chapters may have been suggested to Dodgson by his visit to the Assize Court on 13 July 1863, of which he notes that he heard 'some very petty cases, but they were interesting to me, as I have seen so little of trials'. ('Alice', in Aspects of Alice, ed. Robert Phillips, Penguin, 1981, (40-68), 49.)

12. The Philosopher's Alice, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass by Lewis Carroll. Introduction and Notes by Peter Heath, Academy Editions, London, 1974. After the immense amount of work devoted to Alice, there need, I think, be no apology for including it alongside more obviously 'serious' works. It is indeed difficult, especially when dealing with modern 'absurdist' works, to avoid recollections of Alice. Harry Levin comments appositely: 'Clearly the Alice books must embody certain archetypes, they must touch off some of the deeper responses of human consciousness, in order to have penetrated so far beyond their immediate period and culture' (Aspects of Alice, ed.cit., 217.) Edmund Wilson makes a similar point: 'The shiftings and the transformations, the mishaps and the triumphs of Alice's dream, the mysteries and the riddles, the gibberish that conveys unmistakable meanings, are all based upon relationships that contradict the assumptions of our conscious lives but that are lurking not far behind them' (Aspects, 247).

13. Similarities between the King's treatment of 'due process' and the legal procedures in Hitler's Germany, have, of course, been noted. See, for instance, Aspects of Alice, 207.

14. To anticipate the next subject for discussion, it is worth noting here Harry Levin's comment on Alice's vigour: 'Alice reacts with no Kafkaesque passivity', Aspects of Alice, 229.

15. Franz Kafka, The Trial, translated by Willa and Edwin Muir, Penguin Modern Classics, 1972. Kafka's novel remained unfinished, despite his writing a final chapter for it. Interestingly enough, Erich Heller finds, in that final chapter, a 'superbly sustained, quietly sensational tone of narration that is a little reminiscent of the last pages of Stendhal's Le rouge et le noir.' Kafka, Fontana Modern Masters, 1974, 90.

16. For instance, he is under arrest, but can still continue the ordinary course of his life. What then does being under arrest mean? K's landlady has her own view of it: it's quite different from being arrested as a thief - 'that's a bad business, but as for

this arrest - It gives me the feeling of something very learned...it gives me the feeling of something abstract which I don't understand, but which I don't need to understand either' (27).

17. The faintness K. suffers from is due to 'bad air'. Elias Canetti relates the preoccupation with stuffiness and 'bad air' to Kafka's personal almost obsessive concern with fresh air. In Kafka's Other Trial, The Letters to Felice, Calder & Boyars, London, 1974, p.28.

18. Elias Canetti (op.cit. above) relates K.'s arrest and execution to his engagement to Felice Bauer and the 'tribunal', as Kafka called it in his letters, at which the engagement was broken off six weeks later (63-69). The sense of K.'s being left to make the final pronouncement on himself is echoed in Canetti's comments on the 'tribunal' at which Grete Bloch presided, and which Canetti relates to the 'execution' in The Trial: 'There is no external tribunal that he acknowledges; he is his own tribunal, but very much so, and that tribunal will always be in session' (70).

19. Cp. K.'s words: 'Logic is doubtless unshakable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to go on living' (250).

20. Albert Camus, L'Etranger, Gallimard, 1957. Translations are my own. Camus discusses Kafka's work in 'L'espoir et l'absurde', Le Mythe de Sisyphe, Coll. Idees, Gallimard, 1942 169-186.

21. It is worth remembering at this point that Camus was vigorously opposed to capital punishment, as he makes clear in L'homme révolté and in Réflexions sur la peine capitale.

22. For instance W M Frohock comments on Meursault's reactions to the chaplain in prison as those of one who previously 'has seemed hardly capable of the mental effort they would demand, or of the emotional sensitivity they assume.' In Style and Temper, Studies in French Fiction, 1925-1960, Oxford, 1967, 113. I would argue that from the first pages of the novel, Meursault's matter-of-fact narration reveals a good deal of careful reflection, hesitation, and sensitivity to the nuances and implications of language.

23. A careful exposition of the emotional 'undertow' in Meursault, pointing out, for instance, the attachment to his mother implied, though not expressed, by Meursault's narrative, may be found in Peter Tremewan, Camus' 'L'Etranger', Canterbury Monographs for Teachers of French, no.3, December, 1974, University of Canterbury, Christchurch New Zealand, especially pp.32-37.

24. In this conversation (14-15), Meursault is struck by the way the concierge refers to the others as 'them', 'the others', or 'the old folk', though one might have thought him one of them, and many are no older than he. Meursault notes however, that as he is the concierge, this gives him some authority, and makes him, in his own eyes, different. Meursault's narrative thus keeps before the reader his sense of a gap between reality and the categorisations of language, and also shows how he imaginatively fills this gap by seeing the different viewpoint of other people.

25. Gabriel Jacobs points out a similar impression in Gallon, the prisoner in Claude Aveline's novel, Le Prisonnier. In 'Aveline's Le Prisonnier: A source for L'Etranger?', French Studies Bulletin, Autumn 1982, no.4, (10-13). It is noticeable that in Camus' novel, Meursault accepts the legal procedure with a certain confidence at first, trusting in his fellow humans and his sense of being 'just like everyone else', but as the trial proceeds, he is progressively more and more alienated from events.

26. There is a suggestive resemblance between this 'doubling' in Camus and Kafka's giving of the initial of his surname to K., and first name to the warder, Franz. The latter, while arresting K., gives him a 'long, apparently significant, yet incomprehensible look. Without wishing it K. found himself decoyed into an exchange of speaking looks with Franz...'(12). Meursault describes the young journalist's eyes as examining him intently, without expressing anything clearly definable (126).

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