



The Verdict on Meursault

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THE VERDICT ON MEURSAULT

Is Meursault innocent? This apparently simple question is one of the most difficult to answer. Indeed, can we know what is meant by innocent? Does it mean free from blame, ignorant of evil, unable to harm or simply found not guilty? Bernard Pingaud claims that:

Personne ne peut douter qu'au vu des circonstances du meurtre et de la personnalité de la victime, un tribunal 'normal', en 1939 ou 1940 ne l'eût acquitté.¹

However, an acquittal would not satisfy our sense of justice. After all the Arab is dead. If we say that executing Meursault is wrong, how can we square that with the similar wrong done to the Arab? On the other hand, if we try to do justice to the latter we range ourselves with those whose handling of the trial is anything but fair. Thus *L'Étranger* raises issues that are far from clear-cut. Justice is mingled with injustice so that concepts which we thought settled are disrupted. Categories such as innocent or guilty are not adequate when dealing with Meursault. Our settled ways of thinking are attacked and thrown into disarray. This is an important aspect of the novel, affecting, as we shall see, not just the reader but also the characters themselves. It raises the fundamental question that this article will address of whether or not there is anything to guarantee and stabilise meaning.

Some critics take a straightforward view of the crime. Philip Thody argues that Meursault should be exempt from responsibility for what he does:

The sea and the sun, the objects of his only enthusiasm, impel Meursault to commit the crime for which he will be executed.²

John Cruickshank agrees and points out that:

Camus removes even more responsibility from Meursault by describing the trigger of his gun as 'giving way' rather than being pressed.³

However, when Cruickshank claims that Meursault was 'momentarily deluded into believing that he was actually being attacked' he also exonerates his victim of having any aggressive intentions. The Arab was not attacking Meursault. He deserves his fate even less than the latter.

Thus the dilemma is that sympathy for Meursault will lead us into doing less than justice to his victim. It is as though the Arab were less important—a point that worries Conor Cruise O'Brien:

¹ Bernard Pingaud, *L'Étranger de Camus*, Poche Critique (Paris: 1971), p. 62.

² Philip Thody, *Albert Camus 1913-1960* (London: 1961), p. 34.

³ John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (London: 1958), p. 157-158.

There is a contradiction here which needs to be explored. Meursault is not a chrysalis changing naturally and inevitably into a fully adult form. Rather, he is seen to call upon an outside force, misfortune, to act as a catalyst. As 'conduirait' indicates, he may not be in control but on the other hand it was certainly his intention to let the invoked force do its work. It is not, therefore, possible to make an assumption of innocence if he is able to know and call to 'malheur'.

Does examining the text throw any more light on the question of innocence? In the passages leading up to the shooting, Camus emphasises Meursault's physical distress. He has eaten and drunk more than is good for him and has been feeling the force of the heat since he left home. His walk along the beach is too far, given the noonday sun. There is a build up of physical discomfort to such a pitch that at the moment of crisis, so great is his need to do something about it, he acts in defiance of his reason:

A cause de cette brûlure que je ne pouvais plus supporter, j'ai fait un mouvement en avant. Je savais que c'était stupide, que je ne me débarrasserais pas du soleil en me déplaçant d'un pas. Mais j'ai fait un pas, un seul pas en avant.⁸

The pointlessness of his movement is emphasised by the repetition of 'pas' which echoes the negative of 'je ne me débarrasserais pas'. Meursault's body does not obey reason. The triple (or quadruple, if you count the negative particle) 'pas' transforms the single step into something akin to mechanical movement.

The tragedy is that the Arab sees the act differently—he misjudges the situation. Given what has already happened—the fight—this is hardly surprising. Thinking that he is about to be attacked, he pulls out his knife. The light flashing on the blade only adds to the natural forces besieging Meursault's body and the blinding light undermines his awareness of what is going on:

Je ne sentais plus que les cymbales du soleil sur mon front et, indistinctement, le glaive éclatant jailli du couteau toujours en face de moi. (p. 1168)

Meursault is no longer in control and it is under such immense pressure that the first shot is fired:

Tout mon être s'est tendu et j'ai crispé ma main sur le revolver. La gâchette a cédé, j'ai touché le ventre poli de la crosse et c'est là, dans le bruit à la fois sec et assourdissant que tout a commencé. J'ai secoué la sueur et le soleil. (p. 1168)

The shot is the result not of a conscious decision but of a reflex action—the stiffening of the body to enable it to withstand attack. As Cruickshank has pointed out above, the phrase 'la gâchette a cédé' lessens Meursault's responsibility. The sudden switch from a first-person verb to a third-person one and then back is like the way control slips at the crucial moment and then returns.

This last point is crucial, for it is now that an important change occurs. Meursault is lashing out not just against the Arab but also, as the last sentence of the above quotation indicates, against the menace of the natural forces. As a result of the shot, he is able to shake the effects of the sun and the sweat. He recovers his vision—both physically and intellectually.

⁸ Albert Camus, *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: 1962), p. 1168. All references are to this edition and page numbers are indicated in brackets in the text.

clear-cut. The mere fact that there is intent encourages us to find a reason for them.⁹ They invite interpretation and deny it. What we have then is a sequence of four actions which are performed intentionally but to no purpose that the reader knows of.

It is this uncertainty which determines why the trial takes the course that it does. The examining magistrate realises that what is crucial is not the first shot but what happened afterwards:

«Pourquoi avez-vous attendu entre le premier et le second coup?» dit-il alors. Une fois de plus, j'ai revu la plage rouge et j'ai senti sur mon front la brûlure du soleil. Mais cette fois je n'ai rien répondu. (p. 1174)

Despite Meursault's refusal or inability to answer, the examining magistrate persists in his line of questioning:

«Pourquoi, pourquoi avez-vous tiré sur un corps à terre?» Là encore je n'ai pas su répondre. Le juge a passé ses mains sur son front et a répété sa question d'une voix un peu altérée: «Pourquoi? Il faut que vous me le disiez. Pourquoi?» Je me taisais toujours. (p. 1174)

The repetition of 'pourquoi' shows a mounting sense of desperation on the magistrate's part to find a reasonable explanation for what Meursault has done and, what is more, they seem a hollow, pointless echo of each other, trying to fill a gap where there is no reason. It is the function of the 'juge d'instruction' to use his judgement to pierce through the muddle of circumstances that surrounds any crime and come to a clear-cut decision as to whether or not the case should come to trial. The four extra shots do not fit—and that is the cause of his desperate search for an explanation. Furthermore, what Meursault has done calls into question his personal beliefs which until now have enabled him to reach decisions and guide his life. According to him, everyone must believe in some authority outside oneself:

Il m'a dit que c'était impossible, que tous les hommes croyaient en Dieu, même ceux qui se détournaient de son visage. C'était là son conviction et, s'il devait jamais en douter, sa vie n'aurait plus de sens. «Voulez-vous, s'est-il exclamé, que ma vie n'ait pas de sens?». (p. 1175)

Just as Meursault could know that the four shots went into the Arab's body without seeing them, so for the examining magistrate there is a form of knowledge that goes beyond the perceptual—belief. Even when we avert our gaze from God's face, we still know that he is there. There are other significant parallels between the interview with the magistrate and the killing of the Arab. Both men see Meursault as a threat—one because he is the negation of belief, the other because he takes a step forward, a 'pas'. Under threat, they react in a similar fashion. The Arab seeks to defend himself by pulling out a knife, the magistrate by pulling out a crucifix. In the magistrate's office as

⁹ O'Hanlon (p. 37) suggests the possibility that these four shots evoke the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as does Bruce Pratt (*L'Evangile selon Albert Camus* (Paris: 1980), p. 85). The motif which opens the Fifth Symphony does indeed have four notes but the last one is lower in pitch and longer. Thus it has shape and direction (in other words meaning or 'sens') which is denied to the literally monotonous gunshots which turn out to be aimless. Furthermore, the world that Meursault inhabits does not seem to be one where classical music has much significance. There is no reference in the text of the novel to Beethoven or any of his works to justify a comparison.

Consequently, what happened on the beach is not what matters to the court but rather the interpretation of those events. It is important that the right meaning be found—the right meaning for society, one that will not challenge the assumptions on which it is based. Even his defence counsel collaborates in this attempt. As early as his first meeting with his client he brings up the matter:

On avait alors fait une enquête à Marengo. Les instructeurs avaient appris que «j'avais fait preuve d'insensibilité» le jour de l'enterrement de maman. «Vous comprenez, m'a dit mon avocat, cela me gêne un peu de vous demander cela. Mais c'est très important. Et ce sera un gros argument pour l'accusation, si je ne trouve rien à répondre». (p. 1172)

He realises that 'insensibilité' will be a key issue at the trial and that Meursault's reaction to his mother's death will be used to explain away the murder. Furthermore, he is content to link the two and like the rest of society hides behind the convenient fiction that Meursault's act is proof of personal depravity rather than a pointer to a much more disturbing truth—that there is no transcendent authority to justify our actions. Rather than admit that there is no reason for doing one thing rather than another, for sparing life rather than taking it, society casts around for a spurious reason to explain Meursault's conduct and, having found one, breathes a sigh of relief.

The novel, on the other hand, compels us, if we are trying to be honest, to consider the implications of this state of affairs. Yet reflection on the problem is like the light from the Arab's knife that blinds Meursault—it dazzles rather than illuminates. Consequently, it may be wrong for the court to condemn Meursault in the manner in which it does, but the very concept of the rightness or wrongness of actions is undermined by Meursault's acts. On what basis can we decide what would be a fair outcome to the trial? Trial based on communal beliefs about good and evil leads to a farce. Reason proves equally incapable of solving our dilemma. As we have seen, we can assign no motives for Meursault's actions—not for his step forward, the first shot or the succeeding four. Paradoxically, Meursault has the power to reason but no reason to do what he does.

Yet this is a general feature of his personality, not confined to the incident on the beach as can be seen by considering what sort of reasoning he normally displays. His very first words are revealing:

Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. On peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J'ai reçu un télégramme de l'asile: «Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués.» Cela ne veut rien dire. C'était peut-être hier. (p. 1127)

Meursault shows anything but indifference. His 'maman' contrasts with the more neutral 'mère' of the telegram. Behind the short sentences we can see his mind at work, wrestling with the problem of when his mother died. The telegram does not specify a time or date and indeed those running the home may not have sent the news straight away, for the abrupt language indicates no emotional commitment to those in their charge. Meursault is trying to work out what has happened—even though the last two sentences rob the information of any value.

If we consider other examples of his reasoning power such as his ability to explain to Emmanuel what is happening on the screen when they go to the cinema and his ability to work out how the Arabs knew that Raymond and his friends were going to the beach,

unimportant whether one shot or five were fired. Indeed he says as much to the examining magistrate:

J'allais lui dire qu'il avait tort de s'obstiner: ce dernier point n'avait pas tellement d'importance. (p. 1175)

Thus, the killing of the Arab and the subsequent trial deny any possibility of finding a touchstone by which to judge right and wrong.

That is why society feels such a need to find reason for Meursault's behaviour for only that will allow it to limit his nihilism to him alone. Meursault is a plague-carrier but society's response is inadequate: instead of facing up to the implications of what he has done, it seeks to create an alternative interpretation. The absurdity is that it seeks to uphold life by taking it—thereby showing that it has the same destructive tendencies as he has. In its very attempts to deal with Meursault, it is forced to betray the values it proclaims.

Society loses on two counts. Firstly, Meursault's action denies any transcendental values and so its values are its own creation. Secondly, however, it is unable to uphold those values. The world does not conform to any guaranteed moral pattern but functions according to mechanical laws, just like the execution process in which Meursault is now caught:

Ce qui m'intéresse en ce moment, c'est d'échapper à la mécanique, de savoir si l'inévitable peut avoir une issue. (p. 1202)

As we have seen, the Meursault we have been witnessing throughout most of the novel is a man on a treadmill, without any future. Thus, any reprieve can only be temporary.

While trying to deal with his predicament, Meursault remembers a story told him by his mother about his father. The latter had forced himself to attend a public execution and had been sick as a result. Meursault's reaction at the time had been to despise his father but now he understands him better:

Comment n'avais-je pas vu que rien n'était plus important qu'une exécution capitale et que, en somme, c'était la seule chose vraiment intéressante pour un homme. Si jamais je sortais de cette prison, j'irais voir toutes les exécutions capitales. (p. 1203)

His hyperbole indicates a vision that makes death not only something brought about by human agency but also the main event in life. Indeed, what we call life is viewed as a long, drawn out process of death. It is death which is the only certainty that we can know—not God or reason.

Significantly, therefore, at the opening of the novel the event that calls into being the narrator is the death of his mother. Thus, while the prosecution implies that Meursault is responsible for his mother's death, it may be claimed on another level that it is his mother's death which is responsible for him. It is death that dominates Meursault, creating him, furnishing the pivotal action of his existence and finishing him off. It is in keeping with this pattern that his father is known to us not as a procreator but as a witness of death.

The importance of this view of our existence is that it reverses our normal perspective—as Meursault acknowledges:

Je me suis un peu animé. J'ai dit qu'il y avait des mois que je regardais ces murailles. Il n'y avait rien ni personne que je connusse mieux au monde. Peut-être, il y a bien longtemps, y avais-je cherché un visage. Mais ce visage avait la couleur du soleil et la flamme du désir: c'était celui de Marie. Je l'avais cherché en vain. Maintenant, c'était fini. Et dans tous les cas, je n'avais rien vu surgir de cette sueur de pierre. (p. 1209)

He is free from illusion but is left with the reality of the death-cell. Meursault turns out to be a depiction of the true non-Christian. He is not just someone who has rejected the existence of God but has also rejected the values that are essential to Christianity. If God is the guarantor of the rightness or wrongness of our actions then once he has been removed there can be no justification for continuing to accept the premisses that had previously determined the meaning of actions. In such an instance, as Meursault himself points out, the only real certainty is death and from that future which none of us can escape blows a wind which levels all our acts reducing them to the same state of valuelessness.

Thus the inescapable truth is that even if Meursault had acted with Christian love and preserved the life of the Arab it would have been only a temporary reprieve. Death would have come to him eventually, rendering pointless that reprieve just as the actual murder robbed of any value Meursault's earlier success in preventing Raymond from shooting the Arabs. Meursault can no more save the Arab than he can his mother—or himself. In this way, his inability to fabricate a comforting illusion—be it the figure of Christ or of Marie—leads Meursault to face up to death and its implications in a way that neither the examining magistrate nor the priest do. The contrast between the latter and Meursault is made clear by the following passage:

Il n'était même pas sûr d'être en vie puisqu'il vivait comme un mort. Moi, j'avais l'air d'avoir les mains vides. Mais j'étais sûr de moi, sûr de tout, plus sûr que lui, sûr de ma vie et de cette mort qui allait venir. Oui, je n'avais que cela. Mais du moins, je tenais cette vérité autant qu'elle me tenait. (p. 1210)

The chaplain is living an illusion. Meursault accepts his death for what it is —what reduces the world and all in it to the same level of meaninglessness:

Que m'importait la mort des autres, l'amour d'une mère, que m'importait son Dieu, les vies qu'on choisit, les destins qu'on élit, puisqu'un seul destin devait m'élire moi-même et avec moi des milliards de privilégiés qui, comme lui, se disaient mes frères. Comprendait-il, comprenait-il donc? Tout le monde était privilégié. Il n'y avait que des privilégiés. Les autres aussi, on les condamnerait un jour. (p. 1210–1211)

Death comes to us all. The meaning that the priest assigns to life is just an interpretation that leads to another interpretation. There is nothing real in his life and the whole process of interpretation leads as we have seen to death, the point beyond which our perception, our knowledge, our awareness cannot proceed. Life runs out of 'sens'—it can go nowhere else. Therefore we are all condemned—or is it privileged? The words 'condemned' and 'privileged' are deprived of clear-cut, stable meanings. As the examining magistrate might have said, they lack 'sens'.

In accepting the absurdity of this, Meursault is able to break out of his isolation, to understand, as never before, his mother. His situation as a condemned man has not changed—rather it is himself:

shots. Society, defending its values, examines the wrong issues in court. The priest creates a religion that is a mirage as a means of distracting the condemned from the finality of their deaths. We, the readers, seeking to find justice, discover that it is impossible to uphold unequivocally the principle of life for we must either condemn a man to death or pass over in silence the death of another.

Only Meursault develops the lucidity of vision that allows him to see reality, the imprisoning stones that lie beyond the illusion of the 'visage divin'. It is a bleak and comfortless vision that the novel argues for, one where traditional humane values that seek to preserve and enhance life are shown, ultimately, to lack any value or point. *L'Étranger* exists outside such a system of values and to seek to apply such a system leads to misunderstanding. If we attempt to decide whether Meursault or the Arab were dealt with justly or unjustly, we are in fact assuming that such concepts matter, that they make a difference. In the world of the novel, they do not. Meursault is found guilty of the 'wrong' crime—yet he still dies, as he would have done had he been found guilty of the right one. What the novel offers us is the contemplation of the world as it is in reality, emptied of imposed meanings—as blank as the walls of Meursault's prison and as pointless as his four shots into an inert body. It is a clearing of the decks, a clearing of vision. It does no more. It offers no solutions beyond facing up to death. And yet that is a not inconsiderable achievement. It is a positive step forward.

