Weitz on the Coinage of Man

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by

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Many are the shapes of the divine
and gods often do surprising things.
Even what is revealed is not brought to fruition
and a god finds a way for the unforeseen.
Such was the outcome of this affair.

These wise and moderate words end Euripides' Bacchae. They claim only
that events like those in the play often happen, not that they always do,
and not that the play has demonstrated anything about the nature of man.
One who claims, as Weitz does, that King Lear and The Outsider commit
author or reader to an "ultimate answer" to the question what a man is
worth, must hold either that the events portrayed in those works are pre­
sentcd or taken as typical, or that certain judgments uttered in them are
presented or taken as true. I maintain that in order to sustain such a
claim one would have to show that the judgments in question are so pre­
sentcd as to suggest that those who make them are wise or reliable, that
the events portrayed are accepted as typical within their fictional world,
and that that world itself is somehow presented as like the real world in
the relevant respects. Yet Weitz virtually ignores such considerations.
He calls Camus a nihilist because he takes the book's narrator to be a
nihilist and assumes him to be meant for Everyman on no better ground
than that we do not learn his first name. He ascribes a reductionist view
of man to King Lear because the good and the bad fare equally ill and
some of them say strikingly gloomy things while doing so. I will point to
features of both works that suggest that the relevant events are not to be
taken as typical, and the relevant judgments are not presented as reli­
able, so that the philosophy Weitz imputes to these works is not to be
found in them but must be imposed on them.

Weitz's interpretation of The Outsider is that usually accepted, and
I am told it is authorized by retrospective comments of the author, but it
is at variance with the novel as it stands. Is Meursault really an every­
man figure? First, does he strike the reader as ordinary. On the contrary,
the very style of his narration is calculated to give an impression of
oddity by its laconic detachment, the disorientation that comes from the
frequent omission of expected indications of elapsed time, the abruptness
that comes from the lack of expected grammatical connectives, and other
features. To prevent us from taking this as mere inarticulate taciturnity, the narrative is larded with passages of elaborate rhetoric. Next, do his companions accept him as ordinary? Weitz’s assertion that “he is normal enough to his friends” ignores the many occasions on which Meursault relates how people look at him with surprise, or greet his remarks with silence. This response is not confined to the legal grotesques of Part II, but is shared by his companions in Part I.1 Does he even accept himself as ordinary? If he does, I don’t see why he tells us that he used to have the sort of ambition his boss expects of him, “But, when I had to drop my studies, I very soon realized all that was pretty futile”: in other words, that his alienation is not intrinsic to him but stems from disappointment.

Ordinary or not, is Meursault’s shooting of the Arab characteristic of him? Not according to his account. As in the other crucial episodes, his mother’s funeral, his interrogation, and his trial, we hear of his feeling of oppression and intolerable heat. The murder is presented as though it were an attempt to escape from the rays of the sun. When asked to explain his crime, he does not reject this request as silly but tries to explain that it was “because of the sun” although he knows this sounds ridiculous. Weitz emphasizes Meursault’s remark, “J’ai pensé à ce moment qu’on pouvait tirer ou ne pas tirer et que tout cela se valait”.

But it is not when he shoots the Arab that he says that: it is when he has been to some trouble to get the gun away from Raymond to prevent him from shooting. That the actual murder is not to be thus explained is clearly shown by the extraordinary description of that event itself. Camus is at pains to hint at a psychopathic aetiology both for Meursault’s alienation and for his crime. But Weitz, like most critics, ignores these hints in the interests of a portentous Sartrian metaphysic.

Let us suppose, in defiance of the book, that Camus is either espousing his narrator’s viewpoint or inviting the reader to do so. Even so, the implied viewpoint is not that alleged by Weitz. What the book suggests to Weitz is that morality is an arbitrarily imposed convention, unjustifiable by nature; that the murder was an action like any other, and that it makes no real difference what one does. Meursault in his honesty sees through the shams and hypocrisies of the respectable bourgeois and stands for that absurd consciousness whose existence precedes essence. But the Meursault I find written into the book is an ‘outsider’ not because he lacks the social hypocrisies of other men but because he cannot enter into vital relations with them. When Marie asks him if he loves her he takes this, insanely, as a request for information about his feelings, not as a plea for an avowal. His agreement to marry her he grotesquely takes not as a commitment but as a prediction. When Salamano asks him if he
thinks the police will have his lost dog destroyed, the book leaves no doubt that this is a pathetic plea for reassurance, but Meursault again takes it as no more than a request for information about police practice. Meursault does not reject social conventions as such: on the contrary, he is very definite about the conditions in which one is justified in joining a fight or pulling a gun on a man armed with a knife. To stress this point, Camus provided Meursault with immediate neighbors who are involved with those closest to them, Raymond with his girl and Salamano with his dog, not in conventional moral relationships but in intense and destructive ones. Personal involvement, not hypocritical compliance, is what Meursault lacks. Then, in Part II, the situation is reversed: Meursault in prison comes to feel that he is a man like others ("j'étais comme eux" he says twice) and in need of human sympathy. But he cannot recognize it when it is offered. He cannot see the significance of Marie’s brave, reassuring smile. The dialectic of sympathy demanded and offered or denied is the whole fabric of the book. It cannot be cancelled by the final pages in which, conscious at last of the "dark wind from the future" which is his impending death, he finds his happiness in the tender indifference of the world, and hopes only for a cursing mob to diminish his solitude. Even in those pages there is an ambiguity. When he finally says that "nothing was important", does he mean that nothing was ever important or only that nothing is so to a man on the eve of his execution? When he says that the dark wind was approaching "pendant toute cette vie aburde que j’avais menée," does he mean that all lives are absurd, or only what he says, that the estranged life he was living in Part I was absurd? Only a prior belief that the book must be preaching vulgar existentialism would lead us to prefer the former alternative in either case; the book Camus wrote nudges us toward the latter.

Now let us turn to King Lear. Weitz finds the play "baffling" in its thematic complexity, but I do not see why a play should be expected to have a single theme. The unity of Lear rests sufficiently on the unity of its action, which is quite linear in its progression from Lear’s renunciation of power and the disruption of his kingdom to the restoration of the kingdom and the completion of his own destruction. In what sense is this action to be taken as typical? Tragedies are moving because their action is extraordinary and terrible. Everyone in this play is continually stressing the exceptionalness of Lear’s misfortunes, the extravagance of his daughter’s unnatural conduct, the unexampled fury of the storms, and so on. Rather than taking all this as exemplifying the normal course of events we might rather take it as showing that on Lear’s abdication of his divinely ordained position all hell has broken loose. The natural order is not restored until the end of the play when Albany invites Kent to sustain "the gored state".
Weitz builds his brilliant and moving interpretation of the play around the speech in which Lear, caught in the storm, says of the disguised Edgar that "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art." But is an audience to take that as Shakespeare's conclusion? Hardly. Lear, we know, is undergoing severe and prolonged mental stress; he is, we observe, actually going mad; he suffers at the moment from great physical discomfort. More important, the audience knows that the man to whom this is addressed is not what he seems to be, but is simulating poverty and helplessness. We have just heard Edgar describe his own disguise as "the basest and most poorest shape/ that ever penury in contempt of man/ brought near to beast." This pronouncement of the sane and prudent Edgar emphasizes that man is not beast. It is perverse to take his pretended condition as natural or typical of how things really are.

I agree with Weitz that kingship in this play may be taken as a metaphor for humanity. But kingship is sustained throughout. As soon as Lear stops claiming it for himself by saying things like "every inch a king", and claims only humanity, others start insisting on his kingship for him: "No, sir, you must not kneel"..."In your own kingdom sir"..."Will't please your highness walk?" Lear's royalty is inalienable, just as Edgar is no brute but a prudent man. If all that Weitz means when he says that "Man's unaccommodated virtues have no secure basis in brute nature" is that men may undergo misfortune and be shattered by it, this is no more than everyone knows; but to recognize the wheel of fortune is not to deny the chain of being. Certainly Lear is notague-proof, but if there is no real order in the world what is happening on the stage is not really terrible.

Weitz's reading of the play requires that Lear's demand for total submission from Cordelia should be "metaphysically" justified, being "consistent with his absolute commitment to royal kingship and human fatherhood in a value-structured universe." But in terms of that "value-structured universe" Lear's unconditional demand, like his abdication of his royal responsibilities, is a monstrosity. Cordelia is right to answer "I love your majesty/according to my bond; nor more, nor less"; she will indeed owe a duty to "that lord whose hand must take" her "plight." What Cordelia says is just what Desdemona says to Brabantio in a play of the same vintage:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty:
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you; you are the lord of duty.
I am hitherto your daughter; but here's my husband:
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.

Unlike Lear, Brabantio gives way when thus challenged. Lear’s unconditional demand is a violation of that natural order in which husbands as well as parents have their proper place. Goneril’s and Regan’s acquiescence shows not that they accept the natural order but that they will say whatever is to their advantage at the moment; it is not surprising that their later actions belie their words. I cannot read the play as making values rest on what Weitz calls “man’s royal proclamation and commitment, with no metaphysical justification.” Lear in his extremity renounces all demands, but his humility does not blind him to the natural order. He can still say “Your sisters have done me wrong”, and the reason why a voice “soft, gentle and low” is “an excellent thing in woman” is not merely aesthetic, but because the natural inferiority of women requires modesty. Nothing in the play undermines the view implied by the “Gentleman” in IV. vi who says: “Thou hast one daughter who redeems nature from the general curse which twain have brought her to.”

At the root of Weitz’s interpretation lies a metaphysical mistake. He equates the “brute nature” in which man’s virtues have no place with the scala naturae, the entire natural order. But to call nature “brute” is to exclude human nature from it by definition, and of course human virtues are not to be found in that part of nature which is defined by their exclusion. It is hardly surprising that Weitz seems uncertain what the metaphysical justification of virtue could be and how it would justify. Sometimes, as in the contrast between sophisticated and unaccommodated man, he seems to suggest that virtue would be justified if it were implanted by instinct, and hence not hypocritical; sometimes, that it would be justified if any infraction of law were visited by immediate divine retribution, so that the universe would not be indifferent; sometimes, that it would be justified if analogues for it could be found among the lower animals, or “brute nature”. But none of these justifications would work. Instincts would necessitate moral behavior, not justify it. Animal analogues might somehow causally explain morality or excuse immorality, but there seems no rational ground for the demand that animals of one species should model their behavior on that of any other species. And if
offences were punished by immediate fire from heaven morality would be reduced to the status of self-preservation. Yet Weitz seems to think that because justifications of these preposterous kinds are impossible, "Human values cannot be reasoned and justified at all" and "Humanity itself... is man's royal proclamation and commitment." In saying this he implies that what he calls "the absolute requirement of value for man and society" is not a rational justification at all. But why does it fail to be a complete, and completely rational, justification of human values that without them human life is impossible? And in what sense does this fail to be a *metaphysical* justification? The normal life of men is that which they ordinarily live and in which their potentialities can be realized; and this is a social life in which men commit themselves to each other and to a common order. This norm is implied as natural by *The Outsider* no less clearly than by *King Lear*. So long as Meursault is not removed from human society, in solitary confinement awaiting imminent execution, he must regard his four gratuitous shots, as he says he does, as four knocks on the door of misery. And you and I are not, nor does Camus imply that we are, in solitary confinement awaiting imminent execution. When Lear simultaneously renounces the duties of monarchy, exaggerates the claims of paternity, and loses the virtue of clemency, his actions lead naturally to disaster, for himself and others. In so far as man does create man, he does not do so gratuitously or in a social vacuum. Even for Sartre, man is free only to make a situation out of the factual surroundings in which he finds himself, and his freedom is only to commit himself to some project in a world of men each of whom has the same freedom. Lear and Meursault are presented as extraordinary people bringing misfortune on themselves and on others, and they do so because they fail to recognize the reality of other people's lives and to accept the responsibilities that such recognition imposes. If *King Lear* and *The Outsider* show anything, that is what they show.

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1 Meursault's difference from his companions also appears in the episode where Raymond beats his girl. After witnessing this incident, "Marie and I finished getting our lunch ready. But she hadn't any appetite. and I ate nearly all."

2 I cannot accept Weitz's reading of "They cannot touch me for coining; I am the king himself." In this scene the king is raising a band of imaginary retainers to replace the ones he lost — compare the conscription scene in *Henry IV Part II*, III.ii. He is paying them in imaginary coin and assuring them that it is good money. He cannot be touched (i.e. arrested or punished) for coining (i.e. uttering false coin) because as the king he has the sole right to issue coin and whatever he mints is *ipso facto* true coin.
Poetic justice on a longer range seems to be preserved. Though Gloster says of himself (IV.i.), "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport," the clear-sighted Edgar says (V.lii.) "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/make instruments to plague us." The dark and vicious place where thee he got/cost him his eyes." And Edmund replies: "Thou hast spoken right, 'tis true. The wheel has come full circle, I am here." We recall that the play began with Gloster saying of Edmund, "There was good sport at his making."

Of course, solitary confinement is often used as a metaphor for the fact that to be conscious is to be conscious as one person only, and execution as a metaphor for the inevitable fate of death. But in sober truth the ways in which people are not mutually isolated are as important as the ways in which they are, and the fact that we are bound to die at last does not abolish the difference between those who have a reasonable chance of doing a lot of things first and those who have no such expectation.