Reading *L'étanger* Through an Anti-Existentialist Perspective

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"L'étranger" [The Stranger] by Albert Camus is about a man, Meursault, who kills an Arab for no discernible reason and as a consequence who is termed to be executed. In this essay, we will be concerned mainly with the transition Meursault goes through after killing the Arab and with Meursault’s relationship with the chaplain, who, before the day of his execution, tries to convert Meursault, causing Meursault to shout at the chaplain. This tirade is usually seen as an affirmation of our freedom to do whatever we want and only be accountable to ourselves (also termed: ‘existential freedom’). Various psychoanalytic readings of the text accede the same point. Nonetheless, once we adopt a Lacanian perspective, things are not the same: the ending is still an affirmation of ‘existential freedom’, but in a different manner. In this essay, we intend to show through a Lacanian perspective that Meursault affirms his freedom by “traversing his phantasy”\(^1\).

Before he kills the Arab, Meursault is characterized as a “preverbal man, whose actions follow so close on the sensual impulse that his motives are literally indescribable”\(^2\). The point in characterizing Meursault as a “preverbal man” is his literal inability to pin down actions with words as meaningful or intentional; the concepts of ‘meaning’ and ‘aim’ elude Meursault. This is the point at which forces Meursault to put meanings and aim to his actions, which Meursault is unable to do, as he quips in his discussion with his lawyer: “(...) I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself (...)”\(^3\). In the context of the novel, no reason is given for Meursault’s actions.

By being forced to put his actions into words, the bureaucratic-social body that judges Meursault becomes the Other of Meursault. In Lacanian theory, the Other, generally speaking, is the other person, entity, group, or body to which one addresses and is addressed by. (Lacan, later


in his career reformulates this and says that the Other is language itself.4) It is through being addressed and through addressing that one becomes a subject, a person. In L’étranger, this Other literally interrogates Meursault, tries to integrate him into what Lacan termed the Symbolic Order, the domain of words, meaning, and the unconscious.5 It is important to note that, for Lacan, the movement towards the Symbolic ‘crosses the subject’, i.e., alienates himself from himself, constitutes what in traditional psychoanalysis is called the Ich [ego]. Lacan famously expressed this in his quasi-algebraic mathèmes, as the movement from S, the unbarred subject, to $, the barred subject. In colloquial terms, we can characterize this transition as a movement from a pre-theoretical/ideological/verbal/volitional universe to a non-pre one. It is Meursault’s trial that marks the beginning of his integration to the Symbolic Order.

This transition from S to $ has been expressed in David Sprintzen’s reading of the text. Sprintzen, however, does not recognize the Lacanian meaning of his words: he characterizes the transition of Meursault as from being a “de facto rebel” to a “de jure” one6 (“de facto” corresponding to the pre-theoretical subject and “de jure” corresponding to the barred subject $). So far, we’ve said that, in L’étranger, the place of the Other is instantiated by the social-bureaucratic body and that this Other moves Meursault from the position of S to $ by literally interrogating him. The second point at which Meursault is forced to articulate himself, to make the transition to the “self-conscious subject” (the $) is during his interaction with the chaplain at the end of the novel, where the chaplain tries to convert him.

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The chaplain and Meursault’s interaction results in Meursault to go on a tirade until he runs out of breath. Why this excessive reaction, which the social-bureaucratic body didn’t elicit? The reason chaplain elicits such a reaction is that the chaplain is particularly insistent on getting on “[his] side”: “(...) I told him (...) he wasn’t even on my side.”. Why would an individual insistent on getting “on our side” be particularly infuriating, especially when we think that his motives are motivated by false ideals? The answer is that we know that such an individual doesn’t possess the truth to guarantee meaning, that the individual is barred, Ø, and because they are trying to impose their own phantasy on us.

In Lacanian theory, phantasy is more than what we mean by the word fantasy in the everyday sense of the word; rather, phantasy is a certain narrative which we use to make sense of our lives, of our identity, and the world in general. For instance, when we daydream, we may engage in phantasy by dreaming about another life, what we would like to say to someone but can’t, what we would like to do that would be utterly unacceptable, etc.. What makes such thoughts utterly private? The Lacanian answer is that such thoughts are private because to utter them would be to enunciate the lack in Other, resulting in the barring of the other and our having to face this truth. Lacan thus theorizes that “traversing the phantasy” is the act of acknowledging that the Other is lacking, and that the narrative whereby we sustain the illusion that the Other is not lacking is false. Provided that phantasy functions as a ‘cover up’ for the barred-ness of the Other, then, “traversing the phantasy” amounts to a crossing-out of this narrative, acknowledging that it is a ‘cover up’ for the inconsistency or the lack of the Other.

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7 ibid. 120.
A similar situation can be one where we have to listen to the confession of a lover to whom we don’t requite their love. In this case, the emotion of love would be the phantasy, the cover up for what our lover glossed over in us, such that they don’t realize our actual nature, that we ourselves are barred and don’t possess what s/he wants. (Suppose that s/he took us as being a gentle person whereas we’re actually very coarse.) What happens, however, when such a lover becomes insistent on their confession? We might get angry, like Meursault, and declare that the lover’s love for us (their phantasy) is unreasonable because whatever reason s/he loved us for, it’s not the case that we’re such a person, that, in reality, we’re not we s/he took us for, we’re not what s/he’s looking for. Upon our doing so, we would be “traversing the phantasy” of the lover, which, in this case, is all the more powerful because it comes from an other from whom one expects reciprocation. How does then Meursault stand with regards to the first instantiation of the Other, the social-bureaucratic body, and the second instantiation of the Other, the Judeo-Christian tradition for which the chaplain stands?

The answer is that Meursault “traverses the phantasy” of both of these instantiations of the Other. In other words, he exposes the narrative (phantasy) these others use to justify themselves. Meursault, then, exposes the narrative of, first, the modern unitary subject predicated on the Kantian idea of freedom10, and second, the Judeo-Christian idea of eternal life from which the chaplain is motivated11. The narrative of the first instance of the Other is so because the modern law-bound secular social-bureaucratic body addresses its subjects as reasonable, coherent, unified in terms of identity, and that they’re free in such a way that they’re accountable

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for their actions (how otherwise could someone be tried for their actions?). The narrative of the second instance of the Other is so because the ideas to which chaplain subscribes regarding the meaning of life, etc. are those of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

As such, Meursault traverses the phantasy of the Other (the narrative which the Other uses to justify its rule), enunciates that the basis on which the Other is the social hegemon is utterly contingent and is not the ‘natural way of things’. In Lacan's *mathèmes*, the transition of Meursault is from $S(\emptyset)$ to $(\emptyset)$ because Meursault is at the place of $S$ during the first chapter and he *does* possess from the beginning the knowledge that the Other doesn’t fully possess what one wants. Meursault’s display of the Other's barred-ness serves to trespass the ultimate taboo on which society is based, namely, the contingent character of the Other’s hegemony.

Thus, at the end of the novel, Meursault announces the inconsistency of the Other. Meursault’s being at the position of the barred subject with a barred other, thus corresponds to his having “traversed the phantasy” of Other, expressed as the crossing of the $\diamond a$ in Lacan’s *mathèmes*, read as the crossing of the barred subject in relation to the object (of his desire)12. So far, we’ve said that Meursault entered the Symbolic domain and made the transition from $S(\emptyset)$ to $(\emptyset)$. We’ve also said that he traverses the phantasy of the other, and that he possessed the knowledge necessary for this all along, so the realization that the Other is barred ($\emptyset$) is there from the beginning. The commonplace reading of *L'étranger* characterizes the predicament of Meursault at the very end of the text as an affirmation of our existential freedom. However, Lacan relegates such a person, the barred subject, to a position of utter enchainment. The only way out of this enchainment is “traversing the radical phantasy”13. The ‘radical phantasy’ Lacan

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talks about is that which gives the subject consistency, and that which prevents the subject from
dissolution. There is no evidence of this happening until Meursault’s tirade at the chaplain, at
which point, at the very last sentence of the text, Meursault acknowledges explicitly the truth
about his desire, thereby traversing his phantasy: “For everything to be consummated, for me to
feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my
execution and that they greet me with cries of hate.”14. This results in Meursault realizing the
truth of his desire and thus announcing what gives consistency to himself as a person. On the
Lacanian view, without this desire, Meursault would simply disintegrate as an individual15.

In this essay we characterized Meursault’s trial and the chaplain as embodiment of the
Other forcing him to put his actions into words, thereby instigating his move from the unbarred
subject S to the barred subject $, placing him firmly within the Symbolic order. We have
characterized the relationship between Meursault and the Other, embodied in the novel as the
modern social-bureaucratic machine and the Judeo-Christian tradition, as one that changes from
S(∅) to $(∅), with Meursault’s traversing the Other’s phantasy forming the reason for the
negative attention he so much attracts. Although Meursault is barred, he ultimately realizes his
freedom via traversing his phantasy, by acknowledging and announcing his desire which gives
consistency to his identity. ‘Traversing the phantasy’, then, is the Lacanian gesture that
corresponds to Camus’ affirmation of what is termed ‘existential freedom’. It turns out that an
anti-existentialist theory like that of Lacan’s can nonetheless redeem an existentialist work.