

The Stranger and the Other

Radical Alterity in Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation*

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Abstract

The central plot point of Albert Camus' novel *L'Étranger* (1942), the murder of an Algerian Arab by the pied-noir protagonist Meursault, crucially omits from the narrative of Meursault's trials one essential detail: the Arab's identity. The other of Meursault's Orientalist imagination begins and ends in anonymity, so that Camus' novel as a work about 'otherness' is fundamentally (perhaps intentionally) imbalanced. The Arab, and thereby Arabness, is constructed as a limit to colonial agency and understanding, a kind of personification of the provincial gloom of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In phenomenological terms, Meursault's encounter with alterity is asymmetrical, in that the other as a radical subject never appears to make a dialectical relationship possible. Kamel Daoud's 2013 novel *The Meursault Investigation* recognizes and responds to this very omission in Camus, retelling the earlier story but from the perspective of the brother of the (now named) Arab. By doing so, Daoud both inverts the direction of the Meursault story and inserts the second participant into the dialectic, raising important considerations about otherness, ethics and postcolonial authorship. This essay investigates the two novels in conversation, their shared symbols and imagery, and the central episode of the Arab's murder as both a phenomenological and colonial encounter. I invoke the work of Emmanuel Levinas, GWF Hegel, Homi Bhabha and others to explore each novel's ultimately unsuccessful search for an other who is not merely an object of desire, but rather a being possessing radical subjectivity.

Keywords

Phenomenology, Postcolonialism, Otherness, Camus, Daoud

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In the introduction to his book, *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*, John Thieme considers a key question regarding the agency and predicament of postcolonial societies and authors. Namely, is the act of responding or 'writing back'—by postcolonial authors to Orientalist or other canonical texts in the European tradition—by definition a reactionary reinforcement of the latter's very indispensability? Thieme argues the contrary case, i.e. that the meta-effect of postcolonial reimaginings of the canon ('con-texts'), whether intended or otherwise, is in fact not the confirmation of an oppositional binary but rather a problematization of it. As postcolonial authors set about the task of refuting European canonical authority in the latter half of the twentieth century, Thieme observes that "[it became] increasingly apparent that the official 'record' to which they were writing back was far from unitary" (2001, 2). Instead of 'correcting the record', or otherwise undermining the ostensibly monolithic stability of the canon, the net result of writing back was to reveal hidden instabilities therein, showing the canon itself to be comprised of "unstable objects...being constructed anew by each postcolonial writer's gaze in a kind

of parodic reversal of the process by which postcolonial subjects had been constructed as ‘other’ during the heyday of imperialism” (ibid.).

The conversation between the canonical and the postcolonial, between text and ‘con-text’, Thieme suggests, delves into an interstice whose coordinates are defined by a crosspollination of contradictions, what he calls a “discursive dialectic operating along a continuum” (ibid.). Recalling Jacques Lacan’s insights on the hidden psychological fissures and dimensions of language, the perhaps surprising discovery of the broader project of proverbially returning serve (particularly in the case of texts specifically about colonial societies) was to discover a hidden territory of conjugation and contradiction, both with and *within* the ‘official record’ itself. Thieme concludes: “[w]hether or not they set out to be combative, the postcolonial con-texts invariably seemed to induce a reconsideration of the supposedly hegemonic status of their canonical departure points, opening up fissures in their supposedly solid foundations” (ibid.).

Kamel Daoud’s 2013 debut novel *The Meursault Investigation* is a particularly explicit instance of ‘writing back’, a contemporary reinvention of Albert Camus’ seminal *L’Étranger* (*The Stranger*) (1942). Daoud’s book is a mirror image, inverted lengthwise, written from the point of view of the brother of the nameless murdered Algerian “Arab” in *The Stranger*. *Meursault* attempts to recover and mourn the victim—who functions mostly as sort of a prop in the existential, late colonial drama of Camus’ novel—by belatedly giving him not only a name but an identity, a past. This simple act of naming begins to humanize the Arab, lifting him out of his provincial otherness, his obscurity. It also, of course, re-centers the act and power of authorship, in the quite literal sense of conferring narrative (and canonical) authority upon the postcolonial subject, a counter-discourse that seeks to ‘set things straight’.

Yet although Daoud sets out ostensibly to refute *The Stranger*, his narrator Harun

Uld el-Assas finds himself instead repeatedly walking along the same path as his counterpart, Meursault, if in the opposite direction. Harun explains his intent, as he understands it, to his nameless interviewer: to rescue the voice of his murdered brother Musa and to reverse the current of Camus' story, perhaps arriving eventually at convergence: "It's simple: The story we're talking about should be rewritten, in the same language, but from right to left. That is, starting when the Arab's body was still alive, going down the narrow streets that led to his demise, giving him a name, right up until the bullet hit him" (Daoud 2015, 7). Multiple levels of directionality come into question in this phrase: the figurative, i.e. the perspective from which the story is narrated and the literal, the right to left direction of Arabic script, a vectorial 'opposition' to Latin/ English or, as Daoud writes, "a story that begins at the end and goes back to the beginning. Yes, like a school of salmon swimming upstream" (ibid., 2). Both these senses share a counterpoise relationship to Camus' original; Daoud's project is not mere rebuttal but to en flesh a subjectivity is missing in *The Stranger*, one that fills in its predecessor's silences and shapes the interaction between the texts in a dialectical rather than autocratic form. In this sense, a third meaning of the reversal of direction of the text is the historical, i.e. not just the story of Meursault and the Arab told chronologically backwards but also the story of French colonization told from an Algerian perspective.

The two texts thus take up adversarial positions in a pitched battle, a collision of subjectivities. The novel begins with a rebuke of Camus' nonchalant "Maman died today" (Camus 1954, 3); "Mama's still alive today" Harun declares (Daoud 2015, 1). Daoud's novel follows this path throughout, opposing Camus while also echoing him. Harun seems, in spite of himself, to discover more and more aspects of Meursault within himself, each turned on its axis. Where Meursault's mother is a distant apparition who, as critics like Jean Gassin and Patrick McCarthy have observed, is

evoked by natural symbols (as I discuss shortly), Harun's relationship with his mother is its opposite number. Harun is oppressed by his mother's overbearance, her "sensual closeness" (2015, 16), and the survivor's guilt that fractures their relationship after his brother's death ("She seemed to resent me for a death I basically refused to undergo, and so she punished me") (2015, 36).

Daoud's novel is not actually written from right to left, as it would be in Arabic. It was originally published in his native Algeria in French, under the more illuminating title *Meursault, contre-enquête* (Meursault, counter-investigation). Though opposed and opposing, the two novels thus also share a repository of meaning, nuance and signification embedded in their common vernacular, and so their postures nonetheless each bear a colonial imprint. Daoud acknowledges the imperialism of language from the outset, noting the dull echo of Camus' voice in his own prose (2015, 3), but he does so by imagining the project of the postcolonial novel in European languages more broadly as a repurposing of the language, in much the same way as postcolonial societies must assimilate the ruined artifacts of colonialist art and architecture within their own continuing history. Harun self-consciously presents his story as a symbolic syncretisation that parallels that of his native Algeria after French colonization: "I'm going to do what was done in this country after Independence: I'm going to take the stones from the old houses the colonists left behind, remove them one by one, and build my own house, my own language" (ibid.). As he explains to the graduate student to whom the narrative is addressed, language is the last evidence on the crime scene of his brother's murder, and so also the means by which he can draw himself closer to Meursault.

As Homi Bhabha has argued, this 'hybridity' (incarnated by the figure of the postcolonial person whose identity exists 'in between' the colonizing and colonized cultures), though often understood as evidence of the dominance of the colonizing

culture's narrative, actually disrupts the colonialist project by confounding the latter's authoritative expectations. Bhabha explains, "[s]omething opens up as an effect of this dialectic...that will not be contained within it, that cannot be returned to the two oppositional principles" (1995, 82). By appropriating the colonizer's language, Harun leaves Meursault nowhere to hide, drawing him ever closer to a metatextual confrontation: "You look surprised by my language" Harun later tells the interviewer, "I devoured thousands of books! It seemed to me I was approaching the places where the murderer had lived, I was holding him by the jacket while he was embarking for nothingness, I was forcing him to turn around, look at me, recognize me, speak to me, respond to me, take me seriously" (Daoud 2015, 89-90). Even the structure of Daoud's novel—a confession to a stranger in a bar in Oran (as reviewers like *The Guardian's* Nick Fraser (2015) have noted) is a refrain of a later Camus work, *La Chute* (The Fall) (1956), in which Camus' narrator relates his story to an unnamed second-person audience in a series of monologues in a bar in Amsterdam. Though they are narratively and ritually counterpoised, Daoud seems to seek with Camus' a synergy, an eclipse, where the common meaning of things becomes plain—or alternatively, where Camus, like Meursault, can be called to account for his colonialist indifference. This imbricative synthesis between the two texts penetrates to the imagistic and symbolic levels, and open the novels to a provocatively Hegelian reading, i.e. a higher resolution of two opposing truths. And, as I will argue, it constitutes a textual version of what the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas described as the moment of first ethics, when the self and the other are afforded the opportunity to act justly toward each other on a more spontaneous level.

In addition to Harun's assertive use of colonialist vernacular, *Meursault* deliberately revisits and repurposes several of *The Stranger's* events, symbols and metaphors. Like Meursault, Harun is deeply alienated from God, but experiences his

alienation as abandonment. Both characters respond to God as an agent of the father from whom each has been estranged. “Friday?” Harun scornfully remarks, “It’s not a day when God rested, it’s a day when he decided to run away and never come back” (Daoud 2015, 69), echoing the magistrate who tells a skeptical Meursault “all men believe in God, even those who turn their backs on Him” (Camus 1989, 69). For Harun, the indifference is at least mutual, again reminding us that there are two halves to a whole, even when one is in absentia. “When the sun’s not there to blind you,” Harun explains to the interviewer, “what you’re looking at is God’s back” (Daoud 2015, 39).

Daoud’s appropriation of the Algerian sun as a symbol of Meursault’s existential panic, in the first, functions as an explicit refutation of Oriental myths of the mysterious, secret-laden darkness of the former colonies. Harun, like his brother, is not the other that is the bearer of secrets or greater truths who Meursault must kill to silence—he suffers under the *same* oppressive sun as his counterpart. Daoud describes the movement of the sun on Friday, the primary day of communal prayer, as indicative of the same divine indifference, the effect of which is to reclaim the subjectivity of the colonized, to undermine the Orientalist belief that spiritual crisis is the sole purview (and marker) of the enlightened colonizer:

It’s the Friday prayer hour I detest the most...there’s the sun, which runs its course uselessly on that eternal day, and the almost physical sensation of the idleness of the whole cosmos...As for death, I got close to it years ago, and it never brought me closer to God...there’s nothing on the other side but an empty beach in the sun (68-70).

As with *Meursault’s* counterposition with *The Stranger* and its mimetic structure with *La Chute*, the borrowing of Camus’ symbolic currency allows Daoud’s text to enter the discursive space opened by Camus while challenging, again, the latter’s canonical privilege.

The provincial sun plays various potential roles in Camus’ text; it alternatively excites Meursault to his existential crisis (McCarthy 1988, 49-52), stands in for his

absent father or chastises him for his indifference to his mother's death (Gassin 1981, 226). It has also been interpreted as Camus indirectly addressing the race question, perhaps depoliticizing it. The sun and sea periodically incite Meursault to fits of Pied-Noir (French Algerian) anxiety without directly referring to it, since, as McCarthy argues, to invoke it directly would itself be a transgression. "The conflict between colonizer and colonized cannot be treated directly," McCarthy observes, "if the legitimacy of the colonizer is not to be undermined" (1988, 49).

Camus' numerous references to the sun are persistently ambiguous; it watches over nearly all of Meursault's movements, but it does so as both witness and chastiser, standing in for the absent parent. The first reference to the sun in *The Stranger*, as Meursault stands by his mother's coffin, is affirmational: "The room was filled with beautiful late-afternoon sunlight" (1989, 7). But as he rises the next day, the sun quickly ascends to its appointed position as superego overseer: "When I went outside, the sun was up... [it] was now a little higher in the sky: it was starting to warm my feet" (ibid., 12). Soon after, Meursault describes a growing feeling of discomfort and exposure: "The sun was beginning to bear down on the earth and it was getting hotter by the minute...I was surprised at how fast the sun was climbing in the sky" (ibid., 15-16).

Meursault's relationship with Marie, his romantic partner, is repeatedly reproached by the sun acting as a powerful representation of maternal superego (with Marie as id): "the day, already bright with the sun, hit me like a slap in the face. Marie was jumping with joy and kept on saying what a beautiful day it was" (ibid., 47). Marie is positioned as a potential replacement for Meursault's mother (McCarthy 1988, 50), and his coolness to Marie's suggestion of marriage followed by his nihilistic murder of the Arab suggest a dual alienation from both women. The sun is thus also a sign of Meursault's emotional estrangement; as McCarthy notes "Meursault is fleeing both the indifferent mother and the tender Marie. He is still unable to free himself from the

former by caring for the latter” (1988, 53).

Like these other important scenes, the moment Meursault shoots the anonymous Arab (Harun’s brother Musa in Daoud’s novel) on the beach is accompanied by overwhelming flashes of sunlight and heat, exciting in him a sort of violence that seems less like bloodlust and more a kind of lapse or vertigo (“[t]hat’s when everything began to reel” (1989, 59)), a losing of his grip on himself. Just before the murder, Meursault feels a sort of overflowing or *exceeding* of himself, again accompanied by maternal alienation. Stuart Gilbert’s original 1946 translation (the British edition originally titled *The Outsider*) is more instructive on this point:

The heat was beginning to scorch my cheeks; beads of sweat were gathering in my eyebrows. It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother's funeral, and I had the same disagreeable sensations — especially in my forehead, where all the veins seemed to be bursting through the skin. I couldn't stand it any longer... (1954, 75)

There is a notable nuance in Gilbert’s translation here, one that augments the feeling of a swelling over, a torrent of hot blood. Later editions, like Ward’s, have replaced Gilbert’s “bursting through” (Fr. *battaient*, ‘to beat against’) with “throbbing under”. The former, I feel, is far more revealing, and heightens the sense of something uncontrollable *inside* which, roused to a frenzy by the sun, Meursault is no longer able to restrain. In the Algerian afternoon, Meursault’s subjectivity seems to be not melting exactly but rather becoming untethered from him, spilling out of his own person. Washed out by the sun, his ironic posture—represented especially during his trial as a detached self-restraint—disappears into an act of emotionally enflamed violence against the colonial subject. Instead of a personal or abject death caused by imperialist indifference, Camus writes the murder as a moment of fiery Judgement or Phlegethonic condemnation (In Ward’s translation, “The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire” (1989, 59)).

And yet, as the sun makes Meursault a stranger to himself, it transforms “the stranger” from “Arab” (i.e. the faceless colonial subject, who is transparent under the imperial gaze) to the other who is unknown and unknowable, the wrathful bearer of terrible truths. Meursault describes a shaft of sunlight that reflects off the Arab’s knife that seems to join him to Meursault even as it threatens him, a physical sign of their metaphysical encounter, in Gilbert’s version, a “long, thin blade [which] transfixed [his] forehead” (1954, 75). The result of this assault is that Meursault is temporarily blinded, awestruck, and so commits the murder in a condition of rapture. But, I argue, this is a blindness that has in fact the opposite symbolic purpose; blotting out the physical features—and politics—of the colonizer and colonized, it reveals instead the chthonic level of the other in *himself*. The scene becomes not about the Frenchman and the Arab but the self and the other laid bare, strangers met on a beach. The symbolic function of the sun in *The Stranger* is to both draw out and make imminent the other’s alterity (or in Lacanian terms, the *object a* or the *remainder*) and thereby reveal the strangeness of the self alienated from itself. Simultaneous with its other imagistic functions, the sun exposes the frailty inherent within identity; rather than heighten Meursault’s fear of the other’s impending Arabness, he is literally blinded to it. In the final accounting, the precise nature of the Arab’s foreignness, his identity, seem to fall away for Meursault in the same way as does his own grip on himself, and his violence is instead directed at the other’s *metaphysical* aspect and proximity. While the sun blinds Meursault to his action, everything else is left harshly exposed—in its essential nakedness, in what Levinas called “face to face” relation.

Conversely, in the moments immediately preceding the murder, Camus twice describes the Arab’s face as shrouded in the shadow of a rock, ostensibly the only shade available on the sunlit beach, though “the rest of his body [was] in the sun” (1954, 58). So obscured, Meursault strains to read or understand the Arab’s features and intentions,

and the inability to read the other's face immediately engenders a crisis within Meursault of his own subjectivity: "Maybe it was the shadows on his face, but it looked like he was laughing. I waited. The sun was starting to burn my cheeks, and I could feel drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows" (ibid.). The inscrutability of the other's face dooms the encounter to catastrophe.

Levinas' ethics begin at the moment of the face to face encounter, which is the source of his ethical first philosophy. This initial encounter occurs before cognition or self-consciousness, i.e. in a moment that precedes individuation. In this moment of anonymity, the first imperative of the face of the other is: do not kill me; Levinas explains, "[t]he first word of the face is the 'Thou shalt not kill.' It is an order" (1985, 89). The nature of this request is both literal and symbolic, an imperative to resist the will to murder but also to dominate, to subsume the other within my own consciousness. The other, for Levinas, possesses a "radical alterity" quite apart from the world of objects, the latter of which can be understood through contemplation. Radical alterity presents therefore for me an ethical dilemma (whose potential resolutions include both murder and ontological violence). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas' describes the other "as interlocutor, as him over whom I cannot have power, whom I cannot kill" (1961, 84). The first demand of the face of the other is therefore toward ethics, not understanding. 'Doing justice' to the other is to respect his alterity without trying to counter or destroy it. The ethics of this encounter, significantly, are decoupled in Levinas from rational morality, which requires not only reflection and deliberation but also individuation and the desublimation of the primordial, preconscious encounter into bodies (and then identities etc.). "[A]s critique precedes dogmatism," Levinas declares, "metaphysics precedes ontology" (ibid., 43). What Levinas deems the "epiphany" of the face is that it opens up this space for a radical ethics of radical that is both pre-rational and pre-ontological; it does not impel upon

me to uphold a set of moral obligations, each of which are naturally predicated on a legal or sociocultural, not metaphysical relation, and in which “[we] would remain within the idealism of a consciousness of struggle, and not in relationship with the Other” (1961, 199).

What is especially unusual about this philosophy is that it is not based on empathy, and in fact is theoretically opposed to empathy as a construct. It does not proceed from a recognition of the other’s likeness to me or on the other confirming to me my own transcendental ego. Levinas’ ethics are explicitly spontaneous. The justice that the other’s face demands begins with humility, an acknowledgement of the other’s phenomenological “infinity” and the “strangeness of the other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions” (1961, 43). This insistence clearly distinguishes Levinas’ approach from one based on, in common parlance, putting oneself in another’s shoes.

The other Levinas imagines here is explicitly not a reflection of myself, but rather beyond my imagination altogether. And it is this other that Meursault encounters on the beach. Meursault’s relation and his ethical failure is not in the strictest sense with an “Arab”, whose name he does not know and whose face he cannot see, but with otherness itself; his undoing in this moment is his inability, in Levinas’ terms, to recognize the other as a subject who possesses an absolute (and independent) alterity. In his feverish delirium, Meursault’s most primal anxiety is his inability to practice Levinas’ ethics and responsibility for the other as first philosophy. As he continues to fire, the face of the stranger becomes only an “inert body” (1954, 58) and the encounter with the other comes to ruin.

Daoud too affirms the symbolic centrality and omnipresence of the sun, which seems to compel him toward the same madness as his predecessor. The sun recurs more discretely in Daoud’s novel as a vision both of the colonizer’s moment of moral

trepidation and ultimate self-absolution. Harun is at first contemptuous of Meursault's identity crisis on the beach, and of Camus' implied sympathy for Meursault over his anonymous victim:

So the Frenchman plays the dead man and goes on and on about how he lost his mother, and then about how he lost his body in the sun, and then about how he lost a girlfriend's body, and then about how he went to church and discovered that his God had deserted the human body... Good God, how can you kill someone and then take even his own death away from him? (Daoud 2015, 3)

But Harun seems elsewhere wary of the sun himself, cognisant somehow of it as a threat, its potency to totally immolate subjectivity. Notwithstanding his derision of Meursault's purported defense, Harun muses about something similarly mysterious, something clearly Icarian that happens under the sun. "Musa didn't do anything that day but get too close to the sun, in a way" (Daoud 2015, 62) he reflects, seemingly speaking more to himself than to his interviewer. He appears not to know exactly what he means by this; the observation seems to catch him unawares. But the revelation that follows, his "family secret" (Daoud 2015, 80)—that he, too, had murdered a man during the Algerian war of Independence (in his case, a Frenchman)—blurs the lines between him and Meursault, the former following in the latter's wake. Days before the murder, Harun sees the Frenchman, Joseph (whom he takes care to name) for the first time, and their eventual violent meeting is heavily foreshadowed. This first encounter, on a crowded street in the afternoon, is immediately assailed by the sun, reprising its role from *The Stranger* as the panoptic overseer under which the relation with otherness plays out. "That afternoon there was a big, heavy, blinding sun in the sky," Harun recalls, "and the unbearable heat scrambled my mind" (Daoud 2015, 82). So blinded, Harun enters the same state of ignorance about the other's political and racial identity as Meursault, an underworld in which the other, stripped of his physical features, is at his/her most alien and threatening.

Yet, again, it precisely *in* this ignorance there that there arises the possibility for ethical relations. Blindness under the sun depoliticizes the encounter with the Frenchman, but the other who one meets in this ‘blindness’ is a metaphysical subject, unknown and unknowable, irradiated by the sun yet hidden in shadow—in Levinas terms, the other “metaphysically desired” (1961, 33). The ethical stakes of Harun’s encounter with the Frenchman are so raised even higher; the other he confronts is not the Frenchman Joseph or (intertextually) Meursault, but the radically other. For his part Harun, unlike Meursault, seems to recognize (if only in retrospect) these consequences. “The Other is a unit of measurement you lose when you kill” (Daoud 2015, 90) he tells the interviewer, “I’d chilled all human bodies by killing only one...the only verse in the Koran that resonates with me is this: ‘if you kill a single person, it is as if you have killed the whole of mankind’” (Daoud 2015, 91).

The killing itself happens not in the sun but at night, in a revealing tableau of light and shadow. Joseph emerges as if out of a primeval darkness, slowly taking on a human shape as Harun peers into the night: “The black shadow suddenly had eyes...the beginnings of a face” (Daoud 2015, 83). Daoud’s language here evokes another of Levinas’ phenomenological insights, the precarious fluctuation between form and non-form he called the *il y a*, the depersonalized and primordial void made imminent through the encounter with the other. Literally translated as the “there is”, Levinas describes the *il y a* as both formless and the very state of formlessness, a kind of indistinct or perhaps Tao-like fabric of everything and nothing, wherein “anything can count for anything else...[and where] the I is itself submerged by the night” (1978, 58-59).¹

¹ Though it is by its very nature impossible to describe in language, it may be useful to imagine the *il y a* as a coming into contact with the purest anonymity, a seeping back of everything into an original, chaotic state which is always at the threshold of the world of form. The *il y a* is always both imminent

The Frenchman seems to hover in this “there is”, in an in-between, taking and then losing shape. His face emerges out of and then dissolves back into darkness, and the encounter, the ethical moment, teeters on the verge of failure as he does so. Significantly, Harun waits until the moment when the face is no longer recognizable *as a face* before firing. Again, as Levinas tells us, it is the face of the other which first “orders and ordains” (1985, 97) us towards ethics, that first puts forth the imperative “Thou shalt not kill” (1985, 89). So it is not incidentally that, just like Meursault on the beach, looking upon the Arab whose face is in shadow, Harun is momentarily able to absolve himself of his responsibility for the other only when Joseph’s face fades back into the night: “the Frenchman moved...and retreated into the shadows...the darkness devoured what remained of his humanity” (Daoud 2015, 85). Harun reels at the danger of the moment; objects seem to verge on disappearance into the *il y a* (“every angle and curve stood out so confusedly”), and the encounter becomes ossified entirely outside of the flow of time, “as if our lives since Musa’s death had been nothing but playacting” (Daoud 2015, 84).

Like he does with Camus’ sun symbolism, Daoud here both appropriates Meursault’s action and repurposes it, and by so doing lays out one of his main challenges to Camus. The right to violence, Harun seems to declare, i.e. to deny Levinas’ invocation against the murder of other, does not exclusively belong to the colonizer. By subsuming Meursault’s violence within himself, Harun also stakes claim to the choice and consequences of violence as an expression of postcolonial subjectivity. His murder of the Frenchman inverts the direction of the violence so that it is no longer the exclusive right of the imperial power but can be directed back at it.

and *immanent*—again imprecisely, like a kind of universal white noise or omnipresent background radiation.

By taking Meursault's murder from him, as it were, and showing that to kill is not a colonial invention, Harun affirms his earlier vow, that is, to "take the stones from the old houses the colonists left behind...build [his] own house" (Daoud 2015, 2).

And yet, to his great frustration, the murder of the Joseph becomes itself a mere mimicry. As a sort of burlesque of Meursault's famous trial, Harun is afterwards accosted by authorities not for the murder in and of itself, but rather—absurdly—that he did not do it in service of the Algerian Revolution (Daoud 2015, 109) but for personal reasons and that his real crime was therefore not being adequately patriotic. The other, Joseph, so disappears from the scene of the encounter in the same manner as Musa from the beach. And, rather than being validated as a murderer, Harun is robbed of his revenge against Meursault and—synergistically—left as alienated from his crime as Meursault from his. "The Frenchman," he ruefully observes, "had been erased with the same meticulousness applied to the Arab on the beach twenty years earlier" (Daoud 2015, 97). In the postcolonial role of writing back, Harun finds himself instead re-enacting something beyond his control. The murder ultimately leads him to a terrible discovery that becomes, in my reading, the novel's key insight: that the same story, when told "from right to left", must therefore meet its opposite number in the middle.

The two indifferent murders thus comprise a kind of overlay of the two novels, joining them across time and space. Harun tellingly echoes Meursault when recalling the moment of Musa's death twenty years earlier: "I can't clearly make out Musa's face" (Daoud 2015, 73). I contend therefore that the two murders are not, symbolically, opposing actions, one avenging the other, but rather the *same* action seen from opposing sides. As Thieme suggests about the canon and its con-texts, the murders of Musa and Joseph create an interstice, in Bhabha's terms, an adjoining third space opened by the 'collision' of the two texts themselves. Harun specifically references a

meeting of the two ‘stories’, left and right, as he describes finding the doomed Frenchman at first trapped between two levels or *stories* of his house, the word here taking on a profound double meaning: “The man was there, wedged between two stories and some walls, and his only way out was my story, which left him no chance” (Daoud 2015, 83-84). The way “out” represents, in my reading, a synthesis, a liminal passage to and from both books. Daoud has himself spoken to this point, stating in an interview with *The New Yorker* in 2015: “I’m not responding to Camus—I’m finding my own path *through* Camus” [italics mine] (Treisman 2015).

Daoud’s novel is thus neither a homage to nor rebuke of *The Stranger*, but what I consider an overwriting of a story on top of another which has the effect of subverting the original’s authority. Daoud’s work fills in the gaps, twisting through and around Camus, and the resulting shape of the new “hybrid” text is dynamic, a mutation only partially resembling its progenitors. *Meursault* begins and ends with patterns of this eclipse, as if the fabric of his story is drawn taut over Camus’ and so must traverse the same distance along the same contours. In addition to metamorphosing “Maman died today”, Daoud coopts Camus’ culminating statement of Meursault’s defiance on the eve of his execution: “that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of [his] execution and that they greet [him] with cries of hate” (1989, 123). Harun finds at last his wish granted, to meet his counterpart face to face, live inside the other’s skin: “I too would wish them to be legion, my spectators, and savage in their hate” (2015, 143).

Daoud’s truth is double-edged, simultaneous with its own refutation. It exists on the membrane between two worlds, two societies, between the self and the other. *The Meursault Investigation*, purportedly a ‘response novel’ to *The Stranger*, thus actually establishes a dialectic, the resolution to which is a truth whose epistemology is uncertain. It asks, as its key refrain, an intimidating question: what happens to the epistemology of the self when it collides with or even collapses into the other?

As a final challenge to the reader, Harun ponders the possibility of two opposites being true at the same time and the shape of such a dialectical world. Daoud presents this as a choice to the reader, as if the answer might open up a path forward, a transcendence built on contradiction, a shared reality between self and other:

Do you find my story suitable? It's all I can offer you. It's my word...It's like the biography of God...no one knows if his story is true or not. The Arab's the Arab, God's God. No name, no initials. Blue overalls and blue sky. Two unknown persons on an endless beach. Which is truer? An intimate question. It's up to you to decide. (2015, 143)

What is Daoud asking us to “decide” here, and what are the consequences of this decision? What effect does reading these ostensibly oppositional works as ‘dialectical’ instead have on their comment on alterity? And how does the concept of two texts in ‘eclipse’ inform or parallel the self and the other in the act of recognition? Considering Camus’ and Daoud’s intertextual conversation as itself a dialectical encounter, informed by GWF Hegel’s insights into otherness and the “double movement” of self-consciousness offers us potential ways to think through these questions. It is especially revealing to engage these questions in the context of Hegel’s description of self-consciousness.

In the fourth chapter of *The Phenomenology of Mind*² (1807), Hegel’s famous treatise on dialectics (and other related subjects), he describes “the process of Recognition” (2003, 105) as the starting point or catalyst for self-consciousness, i.e. for one’s fundamental awareness of one’s own distinct subjectivity—and thus for all aspects of what we might upon subsequent reflection call identity. Like Levinas, Hegel argues that encountering otherness is profoundly consequential for one’s understanding

² Alternatively translated as *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, a significant difficulty produced by the German word *Geist* which carries both (and other) meanings.

of one's place and relationship to the world. Unlike Levinas, however, for Hegel the self and the other are perpetually exchanged in a struggle for mutual recognition, one which does not prioritize, as Levinas does, ethics above all else, but rather makes recognition (and then mastery) its focus. Hegel's encounter traces the first emergence of the "I", of self-consciousness itself, through its dialectical relationship with the other. The self, and for the other himself, is negatively determined through reciprocity—I begin where the other ends and he where I end. As Bernardo Ferro summarizes in his essay on Hegel and otherness, "self-consciousness is never equal to itself. It is what it is through the simultaneous positing of what it is not, i.e., through the positing of an otherness it continuously discards... the self-conscious self is never simply this or that. Its identity stems from the very act of negating" (2013, 3). Hegel refers to this movement of mutual recognition as a "double movement" that takes primacy over all other relations³.

Levinas' ethics seem, at least ostensibly, to approach the problem from the opposite direction. By prioritizing responsibility for the other over reciprocity, Levinas' idea about the relationship to the other appears asymmetrical; i.e. it does *not*, as a condition for ethics, demand ethics from the other—I am responsible for the other irrespective of the other's behavior towards me. Thus asymmetry is at the core of the disagreement between Hegel and Levinas, one that ensues from the rules under which

³ Ferro further clarifies the "double movement" of Hegelian dialectics as a persistent reciprocity, an "infinite coming and going, [in which] *self and other* are both moments of self-consciousness and are both completely dependent upon each other: on the one hand, as if facing a mirror, consciousness can only acknowledge itself as self-consciousness by putting an *other* in front of itself... Self-consciousness is a purely negative entity, which must be conquered anew with each new moment. In light of its self-moving nature, the tautology *I am I* does not really amount to a positive affirmation, but rather to the negative acknowledgment that *I am not another*. This *I* of which identity is predicated is nothing more than *what is left* when all otherness was gotten rid of...[yet] by stating that *I am not another*, that same *I* is forever tied to the otherness it seeks to eliminate" (2013, 4).

the dialectic occurs: “[T]he rupture [between Hegel and Levinas]” Robert Bernasconi writes in trying to resolve the two views, occurs “precisely at the point where Hegelian dialectics attempts to contain the ethical within the bounds of the ontological” (2005, 50).

Yet this purported opposition, between Hegel’s dialectic as “symmetrical” and Levinas’ ethics as “asymmetric”, seems nonetheless to converge and find a higher resolution in what Jacques Derrida calls a “transcendental” truth, an underlying symmetry (1978, 157). Derrida argues that the other, in order to *be* an other (for whom I am responsible) must be in the same predicament as myself, i.e. confronted by *my* otherness. In his essay on Levinas, *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida describes the recognition of the other as a subject, as one for whom I must therefore be responsible, as indispensable in Levinas as in Hegel. Derrida’s point is quite straightforward: in order for there to be an other to whom I am responsible, I must first assume that the other is independent from me and is faced with the same ethical dilemma when he encounters me. “The movement of transcendence toward the other,” Derrida observes, “would have no meaning if it did not bear within it...[that] I know myself to be other for the other” (157). Without this “transcendental symmetry”, were I not to proceed from the belief that the other is “my fellow man as foreigner” (157-159), both self-consciousness (through negation) and the opportunity for ethical relations cannot arise. In a sense then, Hegel’s constellation can be interpreted both an opponent of Levinas’ (the dialectical encounter is possible only with *another of myself*, i.e. otherness that is not truly radical or infinite) *and* as a necessity for Levinas’ ethical relationship, in that the other confirms to me my own subjectivity and therefore my responsibility for him.

The stakes, therefore, in the encounter with the other are not simply recognizing or not recognizing the other as subject *or even* the self becoming conscious of itself (i.e. Hegel calls the tautology of *I am I*); if to encounter otherness is a requisite for self-

consciousness, the self is therefore in itself a site of trauma, and the very ordering of reality, the coordinates and conditions under which I can posit the existence and viability of subject vs object are in question—a question I can answer only through the other. And ultimately, the consequences of a ‘failure’, an encounter that ends without symmetry or reciprocity (i.e. a recognition of the other’s radical alterity), are to lose *both* the ethical and the ontological, both the moment for ‘doing justice’ to the other and *I am I*.

The space for a transcendental ethics, for a relationship with the other that is not a totalization, is opened by the act of mutual recognition. And it is this test that Camus and Daoud put to their protagonists, one that each eventually fails. Meursault’s encounter with the Arab on the beach and Harun’s reciprocation of sorts with the Frenchman are each an instance of a disrupted dialectical relationship with the other. Shrouded in darkness (and in the case of the Arab on the beach, deprived of a name), the other cannot achieve the transcendental symmetry of mutual recognition. Across time, culture and politics, Meursault and Harun, like Camus and Daoud themselves, grapple with the possibility of the other as “my fellow man as foreigner” (Derrida 1978, 157-159)—*another of myself*—but are left with only suspicion and shadows. And thus both journeys to find in the other redemption for the self end in utter failure.

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