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Mr. Monk Meets Alexander the Great

D.E. WITTKOWER

Wasps don't care about me. I'm not sure that they care about anything, really. They have their waspy business, I suppose, which seems to involve hovering around in mid-air, directly between me and the door that would allow me to get back inside where it's safe. But if one should land on my arm, it would sit there, its impossibly thin, barbed, machine-like legs gently sticking into the outermost layer of my skin, its thorax smoothly moving in and out with its respiration, moving the stinger closer and further, closer and further, in a steady, calm and unconcerned rhythm. To the wasp, a sting would be a quick thing with no consequences or importance; something it really might as well do, just in case I'm a threat of some kind. To me, a sting would mean a severe allergic reaction and a trip to the hospital—frightening, painful, and expensive, even with my health insurance.

The most frightening thing about the wasp is this: it doesn't care. Even death doesn't really mean anything to it. It has little sense of individuality or self-preservation. It has nothing to lose. I can't even threaten it meaningfully. I'm completely helpless before it, because it doesn't care about me or what I do.

The whole world is like that wasp. It doesn't care, either. It's got its business, I suppose, but the cycles of life come and go, and we individual living creatures are simply and constantly along for the ride, tossed about in its surf; taken up to the crests of waves or pulled down into the undertow with a terrifying and meaningless impartiality.

What can we do? We cannot negotiate with, bargain with, or threaten the world. All we can do is create some order, some struc-

ture and meaning within our lives, and hope that brute uncaring reality doesn't step in to squash our careful and rational plans with an airplane accident, or snakebite, or wasp-sting or something else. And, though we know that the world may put an end to us at any moment, we try to just ignore that possibility and pretend the world makes sense and cares about us. Of course, those of us who are rational, like Monk—we know better. No one seems to care, but we do, and we may be wrong . . . but we don't think so.

Mr. Monk and the Lost Cause

Mr. Monk is a hero, of a kind. He comes upon difficult challenges and uses his virtues to overcome them. But *Monk*, the show, is also about Monk's constant, daily struggles—struggles against fear and disorder, in which he always fails. Worse yet: he *must* always fail, precisely because he's struggling against fear and disorder. The hero stories help us pretend that the world that really *has* order and meaning to it—the good man wins, talent and work succeeds, and evil is overcome. They are stories of the world as we wish it was, and the world we seek to create. But Monk's hopeless struggles—these tell us of the world as it *is*.

Stories about hopeless struggle against the world are just as ancient as stories of heroic overcoming, and there is a basic human need for both. Consider, for example, קֹהֶלֶת (*Ecclesiastes*):

All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place whither the rivers go, thither they go again. All things toil to weariness; man cannot utter it, the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which hath been is that which shall be, and that which hath been done is that which shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun. . . . I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. That which is crooked cannot be made straight.¹

These teachings are considered wise. But they are not exactly *popular*. They remind us of what we try to forget, that the world will take everything put together and rend it asunder, and that all our successes are transient and trivial. And *Ecclesiastes* also tells us, oddly, that we should enjoy these meaningless mortal

¹ *Kohélet (Ecclesiastes)* 1:2–4, 7–9, 13–15. Jewish Publication Society translation.

things anyway! But how can that work? If we know that “that which is crooked cannot be made straight,” why not instead give up on righting the wrongs of the world and setting things in order?

Monk helps to tell us how to live with wisdom but without resignation; how to live while accepting that there is no hope, that is, how to live without simply denying reality, and without being simply frozen in inaction. He shows us the glorious, hopeless, and happy-enough life of a *Sisyphus*.

Mr. Monk and the Large Rock

Albert Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1940. Europe had been thrown into a feeling of meaninglessness—Europeans had thought of themselves as the most civilized and humane peoples in the history of this world, and yet had been at the center of the largest and most lethal war ever fought: the Great War (now, sadly, called World War I instead).

In the midst of this cultural despair, Camus wrote of Sisyphus. According to one version of the Greek myth, Sisyphus had been punished by the gods, who forced him to spend eternity rolling an enormous rock up a steep hill. Upon reaching the top, the rock would roll back down the farther side, at which point Sisyphus would begin his task again. In this eternal and hopeless struggle Camus saw a parable of the impossibility of human progress, for all of the things that make sense in human terms are exactly those which the world denies and destroys. All that human life builds, time takes away. Yet there’s little else to do except to strive for human goods—love, success, respect, honor, and justice—even though the procession of generations have the same chance of success as the rock staying at the top of the hill.

And so, to imagine a human life worth living—unless we simply deny the reality of an uncaring world—we must, Camus said, imagine Sisyphus *happy*. Imagine him standing at the apex of his tortuous hill trying to position his rock at the top. Can we imagine that he smiles as he watches the rock borne downward by gravity, destroying the result of his hard work? Can we imagine Sisyphus feeling good when the breeze breaks through the oppression of the hot sun as he walks down his hill? Does he find a small and quiet satisfaction in his own perseverance as he puts his shoulder to the rock once again?

Mr. Monk and the Life Worth Living

To put Camus's question another way: Although he knows that filth will find its way there again, does Monk feel satisfaction in using a wipe? Can we imagine that Monk smiles as he looks upwards and sees that his ceiling, again, requires vacuuming? When he touches the lamppost, surely he knows that touching it means nothing, and will change nothing (for him as little as for the lamppost), but can he still take pleasure in doing so?

I think the answer to these questions has to be a clear and unequivocal "yes!" and, for that reason, Mr. Monk is as inspiring and affirming an example as Camus could ever have hoped for. He shows us how to imagine Sisyphus finding happiness despite his knowing that life is meaningless. Whose life, after all, is more meaningless than Adrian Monk's? He has lost the great love of his life to a death for which he can find no explanation. He is driven constantly by compulsions which he knows are irrational, and the product of a disorder. And his talent at catching murderers is always overshadowed everywhere he goes—airplanes,² peaceful country retreats,³ a vacation resort⁴—by evidence that murder is a constant fact of human life, and that his efforts in law enforcement are as unlikely to change the world as sweeping up dirt in the forest. As Monk says in "Mr. Monk Can't See a Thing," "There's never hope"—and, later, "Hope. I hate hope's guts."

But although he may not always admit it to himself—when asked, for example, if he's been in a coma for the last ten years, he says "I wish"⁵—and even though his will falters from time to time⁶, he clearly finds enough of value in his meaningless life to keep going from day to day. And if *his* life is worth living, then life must be worth it in general. The proof is in his compulsions, where his desires, values, and strivings are at their most meaningless, and the pain he undergoes at its most extreme. He engages in his compulsive behaviors in the face of not only an uncaring, unfixable world, but an uncomprehending and judgmental society. Here, not only does he know that his efforts are hopeless, but they actually drive others away from

² "Mr. Monk and the Airplane."

³ "Mr. Monk Gets Cabin Fever."

⁴ "Mr. Monk Takes a Vacation."

⁵ "Mr. Monk and the Really, Really Dead Guy."

⁶ "Mr. Monk Takes His Medicine," and "Mr. Monk and the Daredevil," for example.

him as well. But this is where he shows his greatest strength—in his insisting to live in the way he chooses and feels is right, even though people think he’s crazy because he worries all the time, about things that they don’t even pay attention to! Here, he might remind us of another inspiring Greek figure: Diogenes of Sinope.

Mr. Monk Eats Onions

Diogenes of Sinope looked at society around him, and saw the same kind of truth expressed in *Ecclesiastes*. He shunned social conventions, and claimed that even the simple and rustic life of ancient Greece was concerned with meaningless and unnecessary rules of behavior. Diogenes chose to live in a large barrel and to eat mostly raw onions, in order to show the Greeks that all their niceties and civilized ways were nothing but vanity, and an absurd and prideful denial of our simple nature. And for this, he was called a dog rather than a man, and it’s from the Latin version of this title of disrepute—the Latin for “dog” is *cynicus*—that we get our English word “cynic.”

Diogenes the Cynic lived like a dog, surely enough, but he was also a cynic in our modern sense of the word. He denied that his fellow men lived lives in accord with nature and reality, and tried to set an example. But his quest, he knew, was hopeless, and would not be understood by most of those around him. He is said to have wandered through the marketplace with a lit lantern at mid-day. When asked why he carried a lantern, even in the brightest sun—not an unreasonable question—he replied that he sought an honest man.

And so Diogenes the Dog lived much like Adrian Monk. He lived a simple life; his barrel and onions much like Monk’s shirts, tweed jackets, and pot-pie-Tuesdays. He followed his goal of rationality and righteousness, his lantern carried at mid-day like Monk’s constant investigation of every suspect, every date of Sharona’s,⁷ and every janitorial staff member,⁸ seeking consistency, regularity, and reason. And he lived as an outsider within his society, refusing to ignore those things he found hateful simply because no-one else seemed to care.

⁷ “Mr. Monk and the Candidate” and “Mr. Monk Takes a Vacation,” among others.

⁸ “Mr. Monk and the Big Reward.”

Alexander the Great, who swept through and conquered much of Ancient Greece in the fourth century B.C.E., sought out Diogenes, having heard much of his wisdom (despite having heard everything else about him as well). It is said that when he came upon Diogenes, lying by the side of the road, he stood over Diogenes, surrounded by his most elite and honored Persian soldiers, and, with the full force and wealth of the Persian Empire at his disposal, asked Diogenes if there was anything that he could do for him. Diogenes said, "Only this: get out of my sun." By saying this, Diogenes showed that he was free from all desires that could be provided by social, political, or economic power, but wished only what even Alexander the Great could never provide: the ability to lie in the sun like any dog might. And Alexander, much to his credit, saw the great wisdom and strength of Diogenes's conviction, and that his commitment to his personal beliefs had freed him from the pointless worries and desires of other men. He is reported to have said, "If I were not Alexander the Great, I would wish to be Diogenes the Dog."

Mr. Monk Takes Up His Wipe

And so too should we all, if we are not Alexander the Great, wish to be Diogenes the Dog or Adrian the Defective. What strength there is, and what honor, in the steadfast refusal to care about what others say is important, and to live according to one's own views of right and wrong! To have so much to one's own life is surely enough, even if one remains committed to an impossible ideal that no-one else understands.

And what else is there to do, for one who can see the world for what it is, but refuses to accept the world in its ways? We may see that "under the sun, the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill;" but that instead "all things come alike to all; there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean and to the unclean" (*Kobelet* 9:11, 9:2). Seeing this, it is hard to imagine not taking up arms against the disorder, uncleanliness, and injustice of the world; Camus even writes that our knowledge of the need to risk our lives to help others is not at all heroic or praiseworthy, but is as simple a matter as "knowing whether two and

two make four.”⁹ But to continue always to do so, without falling into despair—while it may be a simple thing—is a difficult thing.

And still more to do so with the knowledge that we will fail! In trying to order and clean the world, we seek to make the world into an orderly and ethical place. Monk knows that by solving one crime, he might be able to prevent a murderer from killing again—but there are always more murderers, always more crime, and his efforts can never stop that. In the same way, Monk knows that the ceiling will always get dirty again, and one day he’ll pass away, and whoever lives there next will probably make the place a sty. Even the simple striving for decency and order requires great courage and conviction, as Monk shows us in his quiet and sometimes absurd courage—whether its courage in trying to stop a dangerous criminal, or in trying to get the window clean even though everyone is staring.

Camus once said, in an address to a group of Dominican Monks, “I share with you the same revulsion from evil. But I do not share your hope, and I continue to struggle against this universe in which children suffer and die.”¹⁰ It seems like it would only be reasonable to stop a struggle when there is no hope of success. But how can you stop a struggle—hopeless as it certainly is—against murder, war, pestilence, and disorder, while still remaining decent and humane? Mr. Monk does exactly what we all should do, if we can find strength enough to be decent human beings: he refuses to listen to claims that he should “be reasonable” or “accept reality,” but is instead steadfast in his conviction, ready always to take up his task, wipe in hand.

⁹ *The Plague* (Vintage), p. 132.

¹⁰ *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*.