

Ariadne and Justification

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The revival at Covent Garden this season of Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*, though it was but indifferently well directed and sung, confirmed me in a supposition that this opera affords the christian a useful pair of images for his meditation upon the ways in which God is said to justify man. The musical action of *Ariadne* presents whomsoever would employ them with lively images for the common faith of christians and for the different doctrinal formulations of this faith by Roman and Lutheran theologians. It suggests, also, how far these formulations may be related to that faith. The theologian's nice arguments are rendered immediately appreciable in Strauss' music. Whether he, or Hofmannsthal his librettist, had ever been confronted with the excitements of the sixteenth century disputants, Strauss, in the composition of this delightful opera, was exploring for himself just that relation of seeing to knowing which is structurally so important for doctrines of justification, and he was doing so within a context which most naturally suggested that a man might come to share in the divine life.

I

'Seeing' is commonly taken as a strong metaphor for all kinds of 'knowing', not only that which depends on our opening our eyes. This much, at least, is evident. Nodding in comprehension, I say 'I see'.

It is thought abusive to say of another, 'He is just blind', and to talk of 'rose-coloured spectacles' is not really better mannered. If we want to persuade another that things are not what he thinks them to be we advise him to 'look at it this way', or warn him to 'watch her carefully', or urge him to get this into perspective', but in the end we may be reduced to admitting that 'that's a point of view'. And that things appear differently from different vantage points persuades us sometimes that we have not mastered the relation of 'being seen' to 'seeming to be'. We express it as a relation between objective and subjective and wonder about it.

Another relationship of objective and subjective occurs to us when the discussion shifts from talk of things 'out there' in front of us to talk of ourselves. When we look at a thing we may be quite confident of our capacity to define its nature and purpose for ourselves, but it is difficult to be so happy with any quick definition of how we are when another looks at us. Most import-

antly it is a common experience that though we may confidently declare another man's view of a thing to be simply subjective, and mean by this that he has got it wrong, that he has mistaken appearances, that he has only seen what seems, when he looks at us and sees it is all too likely that we shall become what he sees.

In talking with those who evidence signs of thinking me witty or intelligent or kindly I can manage the most delightful aphorisms, debate the most abstruse topics, exhibit the most gracious patience. With those who see that I am dull or stupid or mean I can barely bring myself to make a coherent remark about the weather without a curl of the lip. It does not occur to me at such times that I am not really witty or really dull. I know I am.

I do not suppose that I am alone among human beings in being as others see me. Strauss, at any rate, shows that he had something of my experience. It is such exercise of creating power by one human being upon another that concerned him in *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

II

Ariadne auf Naxos is divided into two parts, a Prologue in which the members of an *opera seria* company and a troupe of *commedia dell'arte* players prepare to perform their pieces in the hall of an eighteenth century viennese merchant. Neither company thinks well of the other. At the announcement that there is less time than had been expected between the end of the great man's supper and the start of the fireworks, and that, since both companies have been paid, the opera and the harlequinade will have to be performed on the stage together. The composer of the opera is wholly despairing. His great theme of Ariadne for ever faithful to Theseus will be mixed up with the jollities of a circus act. But Zerbinetta, the Columbine soubrette, who is quite used to handling difficult and frustrated men, persuades him that she too knows what it is to long for one lover, the one to whom she could be constant for ever. This she knows will be expressed for her in the composer's music. She tells him that she would not spoil his work for the world. She appreciates its dignity. Having nicely quieted him, she goes off to assemble her motley folk for the charade. The composer remains, marvelling at what she has revealed to him of himself. He suddenly understands himself as the man whose gifts mark him out as the one who must express the inward longings of those who cannot speak themselves. If so unlikely a girl has such feelings then he may be for all human beings the communicator of deepest truth. In his music human beings may hear the revelation of that wonder for which they yearn, '*Musik ist heilige Kunst*'. The language of the divine rises triumphantly. Music unites all human beings in 'sacred bonds'. By its mediating

power they may become 'like Cherubim around the radiant throne'. They must, therefore, acknowledge music as 'the holiest among the arts'. But as the language swells the audience must feel a trifle uneasy. What the composer feels is not truly warranted by Zerbinetta's words. She has deceived him. If there are any in the audience who do not at his grand song appreciate both the composer's sense of the divine and its emptiness, then the contrast of subjective and objective is immediately made plain for them by Strauss. Zerbinetta whistles pertly. Her troupe tumbles on. The composer collapses in horrified intelligence' 'These creatures pollute my holy place'.

What the composer learnt about himself may well have been true for a moment, the quality of Strauss' music for this passage of the opera certainly persuades an audience of this, but it was not learnt strongly, it did not transform him, did not bestow upon him the lasting divinity which he had recognised for a moment. And Strauss, by his sudden switch of musical idiom, informs the audience of this too. The encounter of the composer and Zerbinetta is a paradigm of how human beings customarily affect one another. Her seeing makes a change in him. He is what she sees. She is not deceived. She knows him as he is. He is, there and then, the have limited effects. They cannot confer an everlasting holiness upon one another. At the end of the Prologue we are confirmed in our beliefs both that other people may, as they look at us, summon in us a real response to their expectations, and that this change is unlikely to outlast their glance. These are the beliefs which, before we ever came to *Ariadne*, we expressed in the language of objective and subjective. Not much new in all this, simply the ordinary experience declared very nicely and in connection with the holy. But Strauss has not yet finished his opera.

It may be said, indeed that Strauss has not yet begun his opera. He has simply shown in the Prologue music one way of considering the effectiveness of seeing as knowing. He declares in the second part of his entertainment that there is a more excellent way.

'Be an angel', says an uncle to a niece, 'You look divine', says a boy to a girl, 'With my body I thee worship', says a groom to a bride. These are all Zerbinetta remarks. Indeed Zerbinetta, in the second part of the opera, the Performance of the *opera seria* the young composer has made from the tale of Ariadne, says of her lovers, 'I welcome each one like a god'. We have learnt not to put much faith in her divinising welcome, but Strauss has another heroine in his 'opera within an opera', the faithful Ariadne who also greets the one she loves as a god. And this time the seeing works.

Ariadne, in the composer's telling of the story, hopes for death to release her from the miserable wait on the island of Naxos where Theseus has abandoned her. Death does not come,

but an innocent youngster does arrive in his ship. He has had an unfortunate and overwhelming experience on an earlier island of call. Circe has had him in her thrall. The way the sorceress looked at him did not encourage him to think himself much more than an animal. Ariadne greets him as a god from Olympus, 'I welcome you, herald of the immortals', and he, at her greeting, realises that he is indeed divine. The youngster discovers that he is Bacchus, the son of Jupiter. He knows that he has discovered himself through her eyes, 'I am not what I once was, you wake the godhead within me'. Strauss certainly does not mean this moment to be undercut by any suspension of belief. He tries hard, rather too hard, perhaps, to make music which shall communicate just how Bacchus is making his self-discovery of divinity. Ariadne's view of Bacchus has done more than allow him to see himself as a god for a moment. He feels that he has truly come into divinity.

The young composer's self-awareness depended on the continuance of Zerbinetta's glance. But she ran off. She did not stay to transform him for ever. Bacchus' self-awareness, it must seem to the audience, is made of a more enduring stuff. And he means to maintain it. The last line of the opera is his great cry for an everlasting look from her:

Sooner shall the stars perish in the sky
Than Death seize you from my arms.

The seeings of uncle, boy and groom, and of Zerbinetta, confer a temporary divinity. But temporality is not a characteristic of divinity. They confer no divinity at all. In the action of the 'opera within an opera' Ariadne's seeing confers an eternal, and therefore real, divinity upon her lover. Ariadne's seeing affords us an image for God's seeing.

III

The difference between our seeing and God's seeing, between our knowledge and God's knowledge, is said by Paul, in one of his more splendid passages, to consist precisely in the capacity of God to see an everlasting reality. What God sees is now and will be to the last Day and beyond. 'Now we see a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge I have now is imperfect; but then I shall know as fully as I am known', (I Corinthians 13:12). We have now Zerbinetta's partial seeing and partial knowing, and cannot at our seeing know a full reality. But at the End we shall share God's beatifying vision and shall know all men, including ourselves, as he knows us.

It is a happiness of history that Paul's mind should have been trained within so imaginative a culture as the Hebrew. He was given a vital language in which he might express his sensitive estimate of how things were to him. And most important for his structuring a formulation of what happens when God sees us is

that passage of the Hebrew literature which states the evaluative effect of God's sight for all things visible. The creation narrative of *Genesis I* moves from the indeterminate announcement 'God acted' to the language of language, 'God said', thence to the language of vision, 'God saw', and the related language of judgement, 'it was good'. This is the linguistic progress of all descriptions of reality. God acts through his Word, and sees his work, and judges it to be good. As God sees the work, goodness is in the work. This is the progress of the account of God's creating human beings, though here it is more intensely expressed. God acts, he sees an image of his own divinity in male and female, he pronounces them blessed, (cf *Genesis 1:27-28*). Their blessedness is the value he sees in them. They are just as God sees them.

The Fall story placed by the redactor after the creation stories is an effective demonstration of the divine seeing not being like that of human beings. Human beings cannot suppose that even their prelapsarian sight was like that of God, 'Your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods'. Things seen by God are valuable in themselves, 'it was good', but things seen by human beings are valued as instruments for their own purposes, 'the woman saw that the tree was good to eat'. And those human beings who think to see things as they are, who delight in aesthetic judgements, in acknowledging that 'it was pleasing to the eye', may yet get a shock on seeing themselves, 'the eyes of both of them were opened and they saw that they were naked', (cf *Genesis 3:5-7*). For a moment human beings saw, not as the tempter has promised, with the eyes of gods but with the eye of God. They had sinned before God. He saw them as sinners. They saw themselves to have nothing of value and to be in themselves not at all pleasing to the eye.

We cannot now see either things as they are, or ourselves as we are. 'We do things now by faith and not by sight', (cf *II Corinthians 5-7*). We cannot know ourselves as we are. And since our experience is that others see us so variously we must rely on God's seeing and knowing if we are to discover our reality. It is certainly difficult for us to wait in patient faithfulness. We ask now, 'How does God see us?' And quite properly we set out to answer this, like all other questions, in the surety that God is constant, and that we have been given in the scriptural revelation an adequate way of talking of God's consistency towards us. We speak of God looking upon us in just the way this seeing is expressed in *Genesis*. And we speak of the same sight being seen by God. There is yet an Adam in the world. At least this is how Paul considered such matters.

Paul accepted the view of Jesus which was current in Mark's community. At the start of their gospel Jesus stands in the Jordan as the Spirit of God moves over the water and the Word of the

Father comes from above declaring 'my favour rests on you', (cf Mark 1:9-11). We may live now not in a garden but in a wilderness, but there is the same old tempter telling Jesus to 'look' at the world. Jesus defeats him, he refuses to see things as the tempter suggests, and on this the animals again acknowledge their companionship with men and the angels put aside their flaming swords to minister to him, (Mark 1:13). Jesus is clearly the new Adam at the centre of the new creation. And he is clearly the blessed Adam.

God once saw the race in Adam and blessed him and all who belonged with him. Now God sees Jesus, 'the last Adam', (I Corinthians 15:45), and his favour rests on him and all who belong with him. A number of the patristic writers, from the author of the *'Epistle of Barnabas'* onwards, have speculated that Adam, though for us in our temporal order he 'prefigured the one to come', (Romans 5:15), was made according to the eternal model of the Lord Jesus Christ, (cf also II Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15). This is certainly a gloss upon Paul's account of Christ which makes the consistent seeing of God apparent to the christian.

This image of God seeing us in the new Adam is not at all easy to apprehend. We may accept it, however, despite its obscurity, because we know how difficult it always is to see ourselves at all clearly. Certainly few of those who know anything at all about themselves would expect God to see them as he sees Jesus. But we may all say to ourselves that it is all to the good that God's view of us is not dependent on our view of ourselves.

I V

Theologians have commonly thought that they could express God's point of view. And some of them have said interesting and helpful things once they adopted this privileged look-out. None, certainly, have spoken more impressively than Luther.

Luther repeatedly makes a distinction, when talking of christian believers, between 'what we are in our own eyes' and 'what we are in the sight of God'. Our justification is in the sight of God. (cf e.g. Works, Weimarer Ausgabe 56.268.27, 269.25, and 271.30). Everything that is real about us depends entirely on how we are in God's sight, what Luther often terms, 'God's repute'. It is our salvation that it pleases God to see us as sharers in the wonder of Christ. Christ appears for us '*coram Deo*', (cf Ibid. 57.215.16). God sees us as members of Christ. His seeing us so is our justification. We are justified through the merit of Christ. The difficulty of appreciating this simple truth was rather greater than Luther himself seems to have realised.

Luther was prepared to talk sometimes as if God's seeing a man as just altered his scope, his relation to the scheme of things, his position among angels and men and animals, but such an alteration of relation does not affect a man's inward being. The man seen as just by God has yet to become just. 'Only Christ is just',

said Luther echoing St Bernard, 'but we are always in the process of being justified', (Ibid. 56.239.14 and 56.49.22), *semper peccator, semper penitens, semper justus*, (Ibid. 56.442.17).

Luther was taking seriously the evidence that baptised men of faith were yet capable of sinning. Men remained sinners all their lives. They remain naked in themselves. God sees them, despite their continuing sin acknowledged in continuing penitence, as just. He does so because he sees them cloaked in the merit of Christ. In the present life a man is a sinner seen by God as just. At his death and entry into the heavenly sight of God a man will not only be seen as '*semper justus*' but actually be '*justus sed non peccator*'. Roman theologians have proved anxious to predicate something more substantial of God than this rather Zerbinetta effect. It has seemed to them, though they have rarely used such language, that Luther's eschatology was insufficiently realised. Though they knew as well as Luther that they were involved in an historical process of penitence and sanctification, they could not believe that justification should wait upon hope.

Though the manuals of instruction and the catechisms may have concealed the Roman doctrine of justification under a rhetoric of extraordinary subtlety and sophistication, it has actually a child-like simplicity. Just as those Roman theologians who remain faithful to the practice of metaphysics are continuing the great tradition of such questions as 'Why is it a cow?', so those who object to the Lutheran doctrine and its '*semper peccator*' development, are continuing the tradition of 'Is it real?' And, after the manner of all four-year olds these theologians are suspicious of all nominalist modes, not caring for any answer that leads into 'Because I say so'. If God declares a man to be just in this present life he does so not simply because he has decided to regard him, or agreed to regard him, by a juridical or covenantal act, as just, but precisely because he is just. He is now really just.

It is this desire to deal only in the real that led theologians to talk of a prefatory conferment of grace which rouses in a human being the demonstrable sense of proper sorrow for sin, longing for God, and real change of heart. Justification, to be actual, must rise from *fides formata*, the faith which has love as its forming principle and which must, as *fides viva*, issue in good works.

There will always be those who demand proof of God's action in the form of human action. It is clear from the credal hymn of I Corinthians 15:4-8 that there were in the community Paul addressed in that letter a good number of christians who demanded human witnesses to the resurrection. The 'doubting Thomas' story of *John* 20:24-29 evidences a similar demand in another early christian community. *James* 2:14 ff, written in a community which glorified in the name of one of the Corinthian witnesses, gives a thrust to evidential believing in the context of justification:

the rebuttal of the tempter and the start of the preaching ministry that followed upon God's looking with favour on Jesus at the Jordan. Such talk represents an attempt by the Roman theologians to stay within the knowable, demonstrable, visible, human sphere, and to avoid saying too much about the hidden and mysterious mind of God.

But the primary matter of the doctrine of justification, for Roman as for Lutheran theologians, has been the way man is seen by God, as Aquinas emphasises in his first example of 'the king looks on him with favour', (*Summa Th.* I-II, q 110, a 1), as Contarini agreed with Melancthon in the restatement of common faith at Regensburg, and as Professor Kung suggests in his sentence about 'God not looking angrily upon me any more', (U.S trans., New York, 1964, *Justification*, p. 199).

Lutheran theologians have, however, thought that Roman writers were not taking seriously enough the fact of God's *seeing* men. Roman theologians have thought that the Lutherans did not put enough emphasis on *God* seeing men.

But what does God look at when he sees justifyingly? Thérèse of Lisieux in her *Offrande a l'Amour misericordieux* expressed her hope that she might be 'wrapped in Thy justice', and would it appears have had no difficulty at all in accepting the Lutheran language about justification. What she says in her autobiographical writing fits nicely with Lutheran talk of our having nothing but the merit of Christ in which to appear before God. Hopkins was at least as oecumenical, holding together the languages of seeing and being very strikingly:

the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eyes what in God's eye he is—
Christ.

But if Hopkins says something acceptable to Roman and Lutheran theologians he raises here a difficulty for ordinary decent pagans. God, in Hopkins' quite orthodox verses, seems to suggest that God is either playing a game of 'let's pretend it's Christ', or is seeing only Christ, or is transforming some other human being into Christ. In all these cases it does appear that God is not paying proper attention to the very man he is justifying.

V

Richard Strauss presents, in the final scene of *Ariadne auf Naxos* a confrontation which may be a helpful image of our situation. Ariadne welcomes Bacchus, declares him to be a god, and causes divinity to waken in him, while all the while she is seeing 'I will prove to you that I have faith by shewing you my good deeds'. Such talk is concerned, however, with the effects of justification, like the 'increasing and multiplying' of the race which followed upon God's seeing that the race was good in Eden, or like

him as Mercury, the messenger of Death. She does not see him as Bacchus. The youngster acts in her eye what in her eye he is, Mercury. Strauss' music for this scene has sometimes been thought to sound too effortful. The swell of the melodic line certainly evidences some strain, and even the most musicianly singers have to work hard to compass the phrases that Strauss has written for the tenor, Bacchus. It sounds to me wholly according to the design of this opera that Bacchus should manifest what an ordeal it is for him to come into his divine self-realisation. He has to make his way, at the prompting of Ariadne's vision, into a personal integrity which she has not seen. The moment is one of extraordinary complexity. The music announces Bacchus' difficulties and his triumphant coming into self-hood. Bacchus takes just what he needs for his own purpose. Though he allows Ariadne to go on talking about Death, he does not himself enter into a compliant game of 'let's pretend'. While Ariadne is giving him another's status, he realises his own worth. Such an emphasis upon his own purpose, his own character, his own maturing, is what a human being will now require from anyone who would persuade him of the christian doctrine of justification.

The ordinary decent chap will not want to be seen as someone else when God is looking at him. He will not want even to be seen as Christ.

Though this seems proud and unregenerate to many in the Roman and the Lutheran traditions, it is not impossible to express such a notion in New Testament terms. There is no suggestion in the gospels that Christ is to be placed instead of the christian in any situation. He was condemned *instead* of Barabbas, but he was 'crucified, dead and buried *for us*'. Nor, if the discussion shifts from Jesus who is the Christ to the Christ of cosmic dimension, is there anything in Paul's writings that would support a lessening of the individual's sense of his personal value. It is clear, for example, from the transition made from the sub-personal language of eye and toe and less honourable parts at *I Corinthians 12*, to the 'better way' of the inter-personal language of love at *I Corinthians 13*, that Paul well appreciated the propriety of a man's hesitating at any form of christian doctrine which spoke of him as less than himself.

Everything becomes muddled and offensive only when christians attempt to use God's consistency against him, and to employ the scriptural revelation as if it were designed to express not his will for us but how he is in his inward being. There is less help in talk of 'God seeing' than in that of 'we are seen by God'. We are fit only to be aware what happens when we are seen as witty or dull or justified. Paul was quite clear about this. When, in that *I Corinthians 13* account of the community of loving persons, he moves to speak of our relationship with God in terms of sight

and knowledge, he carefully avoids saying 'God sees'. He does not engage in crude anthropomorphisms, He manages a hierarchy of phrases from looking in a mirror to meeting face to face, from knowing imperfectly to knowing perfectly, and stops at being known. He comes, that is, almost but not quite to God. He returns to talk of what a man may experience. When he might most naturally make an assertion of God seeing or God knowing he reverts to the passive mood appropriate to the man who is known.

We are seen and known and justified. That is all we know and all we need to know. And this is precisely what Strauss is presenting in *Ariadne*. We can all hear in his music for the meeting of Zerbinetta and the composer our common experience of being for a while changed at another's view of us. And in the libretto of the meeting of Ariadne and the young Bacchus we may read an image of how theologians have considered God's viewing of the justified. Roman and Lutheran theologians have by their prying come perilously near to suggesting that God makes as happy a mistake as Ariadne. But in actual performance Strauss' audience hears only the glorious song of Bacchus. Ariadne's motives and actions are obscured in the music. They are deliberately obscured by Strauss so that the audience shall pay attention only to the wonder that happens to Bacchus. We are not meant to inquire about the mode of Ariadne's seeing, we are meant only to rejoice in the actual transformation of the youngster into the god.

We may put our trust in the music. We may learn from hearing this opera that the elucidation of how God sees us through our Lord Jesus Christ must attend, with the elucidation of how our good works are done to our Lord Jesus Christ, upon the revelation to be made at the End, for the now it is more than enough for us to know that we are seen as justified.