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Camus and Aristotle on the Art Community and its Errors

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show the agreement of Camus and Aristotle on the cultural function of the art community (the community of artist and audience), in particular their criticism of what should be called barbarian or nihilistic practices of art. Camus' art and criticism have been frequent targets of modern critics, but his point is and would be that such critics have the wrong idea of the purpose of art. His answer to such critics and the parallelism of his ideas with Aristotle's criticism of barbarian culture, show that the real issue between Camus and his critics is cultural.

Key words: Barbarian/civilized, barbarian/modern, Camus, art community, purpose of art.

"Any authentic creation is a gift to the future."

Camus (1955, 151)

Like his stories and novels, Camus's view of art and what is and is not the artist's vocation has been frequently criticized, and – like those works – often for contradictory reasons. To take one example, it is said that his novel, *The Plague*, and his view of art, is idealistic or impersonal and so out of touch with specifically named political and social realities which require distinct commitment both to enable one to see, and to make one part of the solution to, the present issues in human society.¹ The multiplication of post-colonial, racial and feminist criticisms since his death has considerably multiplied the details of (and responses to) these criticisms.² Or, he is romantic about nature, or about the ease of human

¹ In reviews near the time of its first publication, Sartre, De Beauvoir, and Barthes all considered *The Plague* to be escaping from history and the real people who cause evil.

² Among them see, e.g., O'Brien 1970, Said 1993, Margerrison 2008; or less rancorously and with more balance, Carroll 2001, Lorcin 2014.

solidarity. His ethic is unclear and so unhelpful, or is inadequate to present day issues, or seems self-contradictory.³

Camus would think that such criticisms miss the point, for they arise out of a misunderstanding of what makes a work of art great and permanently meaningful to those individuals who suffer the human condition. His own views on this matter are shaped by his study of tragedy, particularly that of ancient Greece, and what he names the classical French novel. To him, "revolutionary" or "committed" literature is either a misnomer, or a confession that one's vocation is not that of artist. As he says, "I know of only one revolution in art; it belongs to all ages, and consists of the exact adjustment of form to subject matter, of language to theme" (Camus 1970, 348). This itself might sound like an idealist emptying of the work of art from all of what might be called the gritty realities of history and contemporary life. In reality, he is defining his terms here. Art, like every other thing which we wish to distinguish from every other thing, has its limits; a whale, a giraffe and a human being, for example, may have several things in common, yet even among those things we have in common we can distinguish the whale from the giraffe, and both from the human. So too, art may have things in common with political tracts, ethical arguments and religious sermons, or historical accounts et al., yet it is something distinct – as, in fact, all those are distinct. If it is "authentic" and "a gift to the future" it must be the sort of thing where new histories and problems may find themselves already well-limned and shown to have some ordered relation to the good. This is a very particular virtue – the discipline of art, Camus often calls it – which, like courage, many may attempt and even accomplish something approximating, but those who really have it are exact, an exactness which arises only in patience.⁴ If the great writer's (or authentic artist's) activity is given here, the writer is the efficient cause of the work. The material cause would seem to be the subject matter or theme, which the artist shapes to the appropriate form; so, what of the final cause, or how must we judge the adjustment of form to subject matter, to speak like an ancient Greek – one concerned with the limits of things?

There is much philosophy behind this little outline, starting with Camus's own formally definitive sentence. In *Either/Or I*, "A," the putative author, explains that "a classic work...is the absolute correlation of two forces" – form and subject matter (Kierkegaard 1987, 49), which definition he uses to orient his impossible search for the most classic work of art of all classic works in all art forms. Camus is clearly echoing that classic definition, and focusing it on his particular art form – the novel. Camus has a classical notion of art

³ These last topics are given a much more adequate presentation than usual by Newmark 2008.

⁴ He discusses these matters with regard to the classic French novel in Camus 1970, 210-218.

both as related to moral virtue and as a rationally ordered activity (so, not merely an Aristotelian *technê*, which is often translated as ‘art’). Like all moral virtues, the virtue of art must recognize and hold correctly to the limits of things, and is an activity of rational fittingness – *mesure*, which he pointedly appropriates and refers to in many essays and interviews.⁵ The idea that form, material, efficient, and final causes come together to show us the distinctiveness of a thing is also from Aristotle, visible, for instance, in his definition of tragedy (Aristotle, *Po.* 1149b 22-28).

Literary art seems but one skill and practice by which a human being adjusts "form to subject matter, language to theme." Besides other arts like music or painting, other skills (political speeches, informational lectures, histories, etc.) adjust form to subject matter, so judgement must not only be based on success at such adjustment, but at achieving the particular end of art as opposed to the ends of those other skills. As a first answer to this question of finality, here is Camus, directly: "The aim of art, the aim of a life can only be to increase the sum of freedom and responsibility to be found in every man" (Camus 1995, 240). In what follows, we should consider this direction true North.

In order to get a fuller picture of what Camus thinks of art, particularly literary art, and so get an idea of that against which he is measuring himself, we will begin by cutting away what he thinks lies outside that realm of perfection in art – and life, and what cultural forces move the author away from such virtue (section 1). This will lead us into a more centered investigation of what he thinks great art can and does accomplish, what its authentic work is in any culture (section 2). Many of those cultural forces are precisely those operating in the more severe and ideologically and psychosexually motivated critics noted above; of course, some of the earliest critics were also motivated by personal animus, but as they are all dead, let us leave them each to their own peace.

1. Barbarism, or, ways for artists (and cultures and education) to go wrong

That the arts are the origin and center of a culture and universally employed in every culture's education is a staple of classical philosophy⁶ and a point which Camus

⁵ See particularly Camus 1970, 301-305, 353. For an excellent measure of the import of this term—*mesure*—for Camus see Sharpe 2015, "Chapter 5: Excluding Nothing: Camus' NeoHellenic Philosophy of *Mesure*" and "Appendix Two: Camusian *Mesure*: Philosophic, Aesthetic, and Political."

⁶ See, for instance *Republic* 376e, *Laws* 643a-660b, *Politics* 1136a25-35 and Book 8.

seems to accept as axiomatic.⁷ Perhaps we should say that it is just a fact. We should at least note that the centrality of art for human culture is not merely an ancient view; Goethe's famous sentence that "who possesses science and art, possesses religion too"⁸ summarizes the modern project of "culture" as a two-armed development (of science and art) through which the microcosm grows up to extend its reach through the entire macrocosm; the human no longer merely echoing the larger nature of the cosmos, but making it his own. The origin of the idea of the microcosm reflecting the macrocosm has been variously attributed to Pythagoras, Democritus, Plato and obscure unnamed sources from the east. Since at least the Renaissance, however, human culture has taken on the aspect of a *project*, not merely not merely an echo of cosmos within the larger cosmos; this is Freud's understanding. We may now be at the point where this active working of the microcosm has completely replaced the idea of the smaller reality being a reflection both of and within the larger cosmos; now a more Promethean – or perhaps Samsonesque – interpretation of the image is in play. Thus "culture" replaces religion, leaving nothing beyond the reach of man. Even for such moderns as Goethe and Freud, at least half of culture is the arm of art; if, in fact, it is not some art itself which (re-)draws this mythic picture. Whether we think of the human in the cosmos under the more limited classical picture, or in the modern all-encompassing version, it is clear that it is through their culture that human beings may be "said to be suckled with the same milk" (Aristotle, *Pol* 1252b 19) and so united in their "village."

As is possible with every virtue, it is possible for those attempting to be artists to miss the mark in their work – and in many different ways; an analogy is those who seem to act like the courageous, but don't really accomplish that virtuous activity in the way the virtuous do.⁹ They might, for all that, be socially successful, be given medals, fêted. But there are also those who Camus thinks are not oriented the right way at all, and lacking the appropriate orientation any success they do have can only be a bad thing for their society, which is, ideally, all human beings – including those of the future, to whom also the artist is giving his work. These are not missing a mark they know and aim at; in all probability they do not even know what the mark is according to Camus, or they are placing something else in its stead; these are the barbarians. It will help us get clearer on Camus' view of art if we

⁷ It is apparent, for instance, in Camus's parallelism (which we will be exhibiting shortly) of the kinds of nihilism between which his society was torn and under which same conditions, without playing for either side, "the artist, like everyone else, must bend to his oar" (Camus 1995, 250).

⁸ I first came across this oft-quoted line Freud 2010, 40. It is a centerpiece of his argument there.

⁹ Aristotle's exemplary discussion concerning courage and things like it can be found in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.6-3.9.

investigate such wider errors first. Aristotle's view about both barbarians and virtues is something Camus was familiar with,¹⁰ and it is both interesting and worthwhile to begin with something of the ancient Greek's view to see how Camus's own analysis grows out of it, and is both relevant to and insightful about the present day and its issues.

To start with our first word, what is barbarism?

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle gives several colorful examples in speaking of barbaric characteristics, such as "that sort of human of whom it is said she rips open the pregnant womb to devour the child, or that sort around Pontus, which having become wild enjoys eating human flesh, and they lend each other children for feasting" (Aristotle, *NE* 1148b). One might wonder what "lend" means in this context, but other than that these examples seem worthy of universal agreement as suitable ostensive definitions of "barbaric" as contrasted with "civilized," though not necessarily virtuous, characteristics; all of these – barbaric, civilized, virtuous – are, to speak biologically, human possibilities. We expect that among the civilized there will be killing, some in anger, some for gain, some perhaps even justly, just as among the civilized there will be those who are excessive in their eating and drinking at a feast – but Aristotle's examples are of what is outside the civilized. While Aristotle names certain peoples as being barbarians, what demands they be defined so is not their geographical place, their race, the color of their skin and hair, the distribution of vowels in their names, or any other such thing, but their cultural practices – practices like eating their children.¹¹

But perhaps in our day even this conception of "barbarism" is questionable – is too culturally determinate – to have contemporary, not to say post-modern validity. After all,

¹⁰ I do not quite agree with Sharpe's (2015) chart relating Camusian *measure* with Aristotelian virtue ("Appendix Two: Camusian *Measure*: Philosophic, Aesthetic, and Political"). There it *looks* as if Camus is accepting one excess and denying the opposed, but saying "yes and no" to the middle position. For instance, considering his view on "reason's capacity to understand totality," I find Camus saying as loud a NO! to the (so-called) "negative" irrationalism of Kierkegaard as to the (real) "affirmative" totalizing rationalism (which Sharpe labels "YES!") of Hegel and Marx. Sharpe's discussion in the body of the book, however, shows that Camus does reject both extremes, and finds his *measure* in "yes and no." However, by defining negation as one extreme and affirmation as another with the "yes and no" between them Sharpe's explication seems to owe more to Hegelian logic than Aristotle's. Saying no to both extremes (as Camus does) is perfect Aristotelianism; to the mean, however, one does not say "yes and no," but yes—which means 'no' to motives on both sides which inhibit fulfillment of that yes.

¹¹ Aristotle has frequently been held up as someone who is both racist and racialist; I do not think that reading of his is correct, but cannot argue about that here. "Aristotle on the non-Greek Other," a recent paper (June 10, 2020) by Thornton Lockwood, given remotely to interested members of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy makes a quite reasonable case, as have other scholars previously.

there are many people who think that ripping children out of the womb is a woman's right, and though they do not yet go so far as eating them, most of these people do think it a waste that such useful proteins as make up this meat cannot be used for research purposes and medicines in many countries; these medicines, of course, would be taken internally, though perhaps more often by injection than by mouth. To be sure, our modern surgical techniques are cleaner than were available to the earlier barbarians – who did not even have forks – and if cleanliness is next to godliness I suppose our culture must be more godly. Probably the same god, but we are higher on the worship ladder than such barbarians. Or maybe not; for as Camus, a self-confessed agnostic wrote in his own post-Nietzschean time, "It is not certain that our time has lacked gods. Many have been proposed, usually stupid or cowardly ones" (Camus 1970, 228). At least the ancient pagans seem to have avoided that, as did the Aztecs. And lest these remarks seem extreme or off the point, recall that Camus is not unclear about the connection between law, cultural practices, and the growth of horror in what he knew as recent history. "Bloodthirsty laws, it has been said, make bloodthirsty customs.... One kills for a nation or a class that has been granted divine status" (Camus 1970, 227f). Sociology can pick these races, classes, ages, and even nations out; most sociologists, as most other academics, are from the divine class themselves. If certain groups are left out of consideration, they are not even ignored: they do not appear. Such clean, perhaps even surgical, killing has all the humanity of the plague bacillus. It is not new; only the methods are. In his own voice, Camus complains, "Without the death penalty, Europe would not be infected by the corpses accumulated for the last twenty years in its tired soil" (Camus 1970, 229). We now have different ways of accumulating corpses and infection. One of his characters – Tarrou – offers a more ambivalent phrasing: "the order of the world is shaped by death" (Camus 1948, 117). A more recent French philosopher has proposed this idea as a paradox: "We can no longer be sure that our civilization does not engender itself as barbarity" (Nancy 2013, 25).¹² Can we any longer make this distinction – barbaric/civilized? Have I drawn it wrongly? On which side is our general culture? It is clear that Camus did not put his own culture on the "civilized" side of the line. I would be surprised if he considered we have advanced.

We have been led to this: The intellectual virtue Aristotle calls *technê* (art, the root of our 'technical' words) is that virtue of *praxis* which allows cleaner, faster and more regular and exactly measured results than just punting after what one desires; it is the rationally ordered practice pursuing a particular product or end, though the desire which sets the end

¹² He is not alone: Herbert 1986, and Coatzee 1980 also suggest that we have met the barbarian, and he is us.

may be as barbaric and wild as anything thought of in Pontus. Here the distinction we may develop is "barbaric /modern," and by modern we would mean more technologically advanced, as the ICBM is a considerable technical advance over the ancient siege machines of Archimedes, machine guns more effective than bolt action rifles, and the fork cleaner than the finger, but likely not as clean as a new needle. Education is one excellent, and even ancient, means of developing such modernity further. Even since Camus's day we would have to confess that surgical techniques have advanced admirably. This is called progress, and it is not a myth. Almost all of the modern university's education aims at just such technical training and advancement. So, the modern university aims at overcoming barbarism in the sense opposed to modern, but this does not necessitate or imply that it, much less anything else in our culture, is attempting to overcome barbarism in the sense opposed to civilized. The ancients considered that overcoming barbarism, in the sense of becoming civilized, was the main task of education, rather than raising one into technological competence – which may very well be merely a more efficient barbarism. Camus shows himself to agree with them.

The central point of this set of distinctions is to show that in the world-view determined by *technê* (an intellectual, but not a moral virtue) the human being is merely another "resource" or tool; perhaps, on some occasions, advancing to the level of "capital." A living tool, by the way is Aristotle's definition of a slave (Aristotle, *Pol* 1253b 28-54a 18). That one can now get a college degree in Human Resources, or Human Resources Management is merely an indication that, as with forests and mines, there are more and less efficient ways to utilize these resources and arrange these toolings. Under this determination, it is not essentially a moral problem that these resources are sometimes wasted or tools broken, it is a problem of efficiency; that is the sort of problem every *technê* solves. These ways, of course, require constant study, as improvements in other technical areas requires reconsideration of proper means of utilization of human resources. Unfortunately for many human beings, Camus' father included, military commanders were slow to discover the necessity for changing their utilization of the common soldier in the face of trenches with well-dug in machine guns. Technical mastery over nature includes as a matter of course mastery in the use of human resources: obviously we need degrees in which people are trained in this virtue; our science is improving daily: that's modernity, not barbarism. Of course, it is offensive to say such things directly, better that they come from the mouth of a fictional character. In *The Fall*, Clamence notes that we are all against slavery – adamantly so: That we should be forced to establish it at home or in our factories – well, that's natural; but boasting about it, that's the limit!" (Camus 1991, 44). A little later: "Just between us,

slavery, preferably with a smile, is inevitable then. But we must not admit it" (Camus 1991, 46).

At any rate, since the barbarism Camus is concerned with is that of our first distinction, not this last, let Aristotle's examples stand as our central image of barbarism, by which neither I nor Aristotle nor Camus mean to point out a certain temporal order, or even facility in Greek, but something possible in all times, in all places, in all languages. Perhaps, as I have suggested, we no longer feel like we can make such a distinction; as if calling any culture "barbaric" is barbaric. In that case neither Aristotle nor Camus has anything to say to us, for they presume this distinction, and are working to clarify it further – and show us that one side of the line is superior to the other. It would necessarily follow, if we abandon the distinction barbaric/civilized, that Camus is mistaken when he claims that the "poet for all times speaks accurately for our own" (Camus 1970, 323). For if the only distinction we can make among cultures is the temporal one – barbaric/modern, we should hardly expect art from one time should be able to speak to another; it can only be an example of "what they did back then." Let us be clear that Aristotle's criticism of barbarian culture does not presume the barbarian's complete irrationality or inability to organize the things of physical and social life – they invented and ran empires, after all. We have gone to the moon; Alexander only got to India; the Persians were stopped at Marathon. Barbarians are barbarians based on their non-cognizance of the end, the telos or final cause of human being, and, since we are social animals, of society. At the beginning of *Politics* he criticizes barbarian cultures for not realizing the difference between a woman and a slave, for the end or telos of the partnership or community with a woman is a different thing than the end of partnership or community with the slave. The barbarians are slavish in that, like technology, they can accomplish great tasks, but (also like technology) are not capable of foreseeing and setting the proper end; such beings need a master for even their own good to be accomplished (Aristotle, *Pol* 1252a 32-b 8).

Let us illustrate by going back to Aristotle's examples of barbarism. The end of nature in the community of man and woman is the production and raising of children into the human community, and, as natural social beings, the achievement of this continuation of itself is a significant part of the natural human good. Therefore, destroying this "for the sake of which" sort of being (the child) and, by eating it, returning it to that of which it is a proper end is to turn what is an end in itself into a mere means to an end. Doing this is a backasswardizing of nature. It is a symptom of barbarian slavishness not to be able to see this. For a culture to celebrate it, as is said of the people of Pontus, is an indication that they ought to be ruled by more reasonable people, perhaps Greeks – in order that their own natural good might be achieved by them, for their sort of celebration is, rather, the destruc-

tion of a most significant aspect of the natural human good. The child is not the only human good, or even the highest human good, though it does have the potential for that according to Aristotle, but it is a natural good, an *end*, a "for the sake of which" sort of being; it is not merely a *means* useful for achieving some other "for the sake of which" – as was once considered true of money, forests, and mines.

These Aristotelian distinctions are not merely some intellectual artifact from a long forgotten day, for we find them also in the modern economist John Maynard Keynes, who places it in the future, as if "now" – at the time of his writing – it is not so. Fortuitously enough he refers to this distinction in an essay he titled "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren." There he voices the hope that "we shall once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful. We shall honour those who can teach us how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well" (Keynes 1931, 372). It seems J.M. lived in a barbaric society – one that did not cognize the end, or place it above the means; he hoped for better for his grandchildren; he hoped to be led into a society which lived in proper accord with this distinction of ends and means and he also seems to know what proper and therefore better meant: recognizing ends and valuing them above means. He recognized the ability to do this as a virtue, and a higher virtue than rational ordering of means of production to any end whatsoever, which we have been calling *technê* after Aristotle, and at which J.M. apparently thought his particular society was expert, while being entirely ignorant of its proper ends. Mr. Keynes is confessing to living in a barbaric society. He seems unaware that the improvement of *technê* is a popular slave activity, and since the barbarian does not know the end of nature, that improvement becomes a "for its own sake" eternally progressing machine.

A more comic example of this kind of mistake might be seen in the contemporary honorific phrase "pushing the envelope." An envelope, for those not up on history, was an element of a very old technology which allowed for the sending of private messages from one person to another through public conveyance. I suppose the phrase does not literally mean pushing the envelope along to its destination, but more like pushing out the folds and seams of the envelope. One could, of course, still write a message on this, but it is no longer intelligible to call it an envelope. Flattening the folds and breaking the seams makes it something else. It has been evolved into a postcard perhaps. What has been destroyed is precisely that *for the sake of which* the envelope was invented – to deliver a private message by public conveyance. It is no longer the same species of thing; nor can *its* end be accomplished. "Pushing the envelope" is, then, not a praiseworthy end, nor a good to be aimed at; it is a process of destroying the end. It could be considered a justification, or phrase of commendation, only by a barbarian – someone who does not know the end. But

hey, it's different! It's new! That it is considered daring and high praise in our culture is symptomatic.

These examples may seem extravagantly beside the point, as if the author has forgotten his end. Let us bring them back to the issue: call the barbarian denial or non-recognition or destruction of the existence of this sort of ordering in nature or action – that some ends of human action are more final than others by nature – nihilism, since what it does is reduce to nothing the ends implicit in nature or human action. Nihilism is a verb, then; it is a sort of human action, upon nature and upon the human being itself. We might call the imperative form of this verb methodological denial, as in the methodological denial that there are any such ends in nature. Such methodological denial is linked in modern thought to methodological atheism: the rigorous denial that god has any relation to the world or what goes on in it. Such methodological atheism is, it is said, part of the purification of science from everything not subject to those strictly limited modes recognized as "empirical."

In a couple of essays on art, Camus distinguishes two sorts of nihilism,¹³ in which we may see the outline of two forms of cultural barbarism, of which, as we see through Aristotle's examples, the essence is not to know the end. These two forms of cultural barbarism or nihilism Camus calls totalitarian and bourgeois, and his essays are the *cri de coeur* of an artist who feels himself crushed between them, and who must combat both of them at the same time.

Let us, then, take as the primary sense, or the focal meaning of barbarism, what is exhibited by Aristotle, and seconded by Keynes: not knowing, or destroying the natural end. Then, according to Camus, there are two opposing ways of barbaric or nihilistic operation in modern art and culture, both of which accomplish the same thing: deny the end of nature or destroy that "for the sake of which" an activity or partnership – in this case the activity of art – is undertaken. What we today call "the art community" – the community of artist and audience – is one sort of partnership, and Camus is intent upon showing how the purpose of that partnership is destroyed in two different ways. Since the "aim of art" is to "increase the sum of individual freedom and responsibility to be found in every man and in the world" we may already expect these nihilistic works of art to be those "that tend to make man conform and to convert him to some external rule. Others tend to subject him to what is worst in him" (Camus 1995, 240). Artists who aim thus are barbarians: they do not know the end; they aim at a wrong one.

¹³ Actually, a lecture and an interview, both of which can be found in Camus 1995: 235-272.

The first form of barbarism is bourgeois nihilism; Camus (writing in the 1950s) saw this sort developing and already powerful in the West; it makes art "a deceptive luxury." This nihilism develops in two ways: It can adapt itself "to what the majority of our society wants,... [and so become] a meaningless recreation" (Camus 1995, 253), or, if the artist rejects this and refuses to become a manufacturer of the demanded titillations for the usual "art consumer," he embraces some form of "art for art's sake" which feeds on the affectations or abstractions preferred by the artist and his like-thinking coterie. This latter Camus calls "merely a voicing of irresponsibility." Such a one may "charm a few individuals" (Camus 1995, 255) or produce a larger coterie of like-minded sophisticates, but neither he nor the manufacturer of mass titillation are taking as their subject "reality as it is lived and endured by all" (Camus 1995 257), and so none is able to achieve the universal communication among men concerning that lived reality at which art aims, for the sake of increasing freedom and responsibility.

The problem of bourgeois nihilism is not merely a problem for art, but is rooted in, and a symptom of, our society being what Camus calls "a society of merchants," that is, one in which "things disappear in favor of signs." We are not so much a "society of money (gold can arouse carnal passions) but one of abstract symbols of money" (Camus 1995, 253). The measure of wealth is not a reality or set of realities embodying various versions of worth – houses, farms, gold coins, cattle, works of art – but a set of figures which enumerate certain possibilities of exchange. This removal from reality carries into everything, not only the world of art, and has merely advanced further from reality since Camus's day, symbolized most effectively by the present next big thing – virtual reality. But before achieving this *contradictio in terminis* of the present age we might exhibit Camus's point by asking a couple other questions, like what exactly *is* a derivative? What real thing is quantitative easing loosening the quantity of? We have, of course, a whole college dedicated to learning these terms and learning how to operate among such symbols. It is part of the *technê* of finance and modern economics. These are, without question, the *technai* of modernity, as Mr. Keynes understood.

This further implication concerning the virtuality of society looks to be the *reductio ad absurdum* of Camus' position. For if the world has become even more virtual, even more a life in mere signs rather than realities, Camus' complaint that inauthentic art, in giving itself over to such, misses "reality as it is lived and endured by all" is, in fact, false. For our ever more modern society has become precisely ever more artificial, ever more a matter of signs, ever more an unreality in which all share: That's real life! A real plague might break the hold of this artificial plague, but barring that the world we all share *is* the

screen in front of us. Of course, we may try to escape the real plague by faster fleeing into the virtual; as long as the power stations don't go down, we'll be ok.

The point of Camus's complaint here is that we are embodied beings; real plagues and total wars, like that which Camus endured, remind us all of this natural fact. The sorts of wars America and the West have fought since that time, as any sociologist or historian can point out, have not approached making the fact of embodiment one in which *everyone* feels rooted. Certain races, classes, and peoples have felt it, because they have been the "sacrifice" made on the altar of the divinity of other races, classes, and peoples. Only some peoples are perpetual refugees; only some classes offer their children to the military – others join wine clubs. The Aztecs have won: we acclaim those slaves who have been killed as holy victims or honored heroes, and the sun continues to rise – for us.¹⁴ Reality is that we all live and die as embodied beings, but our type of virtual society, as Camus says, sets "a certain kind of humbug at the center of its experience and its universe" (Camus 1995, 253). He figures this society in his description of life in Oran; we may see it most precisely in what the narrator describes as the difficulty of dying there: "think of what it must be for a dying man, trapped behind hundreds of walls all sizzling with heat, while the whole population, sitting in cafés or hanging on the telephone, is discussing shipments, bills of lading, discounts!" (Camus 1948, 5). All of our carnal embodied realities are treated as something artificial – or virtual, perhaps, these days – even sex, which used to be dependably physical. Now, fortunately, we will remain on social media even after our death! We will be just as really there as we are now. These accounts will not, of course, be so up to date – unless we set up an algorithmic bot to like, dislike, remember, etc. But I suppose Google and Amazon have beaten me to the punch. This universal artificial making, quite naturally, leads many people – not just the artists – to think they can and do create their own reality. Virtually, they do. Nonetheless, for some queer reason, most continue to go out (when they really go out) via the doors rather than the windows, particularly when they are above the second floor. The contemporary bourgeois world is one in which real relations have gone the way of the envelope. It is no surprise that most art, too, should be cut off from its living root and be merely one more deceptive luxury – in one way or the other. Does the person who dies posting a selfie on social media realize he or she has spent its life for titillation? Should we hope so? Such is one sort of modern bourgeois barbarian. It might seem one's

¹⁴ I intend this remark to fit not only the discussion of barbarism above, but also with Georges Bataille's excellent analysis of the self-deception at the root of Aztec sacrifice in *The Accursed Share* Vol 1: 45-62. The Aztec entered the deathless realm of the divine by sacrifice, we enter virtually.

freedom is absolute, which it is – absolutely virtual; we must hope someone keeps the electricity on; power tools are helpless without it.

The second sort of nihilism Camus named was the totalitarian form. Writing about the movements of the 40s and 50s, what was in the forefront of his mind was socialist realism; but it would be false to think that totalitarian nihilism died with the USSR. If the bourgeois barbarian, growing up in the artificial, magnifies and practices the pursuit of unreal ends, then, according to the socialist realist, *et al.*, the trick must be to strive toward realism both in life and in art. So, Camus considers the problem of being realistic in art and, using the example of film, concludes "there is but one possible realistic film: the one that is constantly shown us by an invisible camera on the world's screen. The only realistic artist, then, is God, if he exists." So "the artists ...who insist on speaking of reality and reality alone are caught in a painful dilemma. They must be realistic and yet cannot be" (Camus 1995, 259). Full realism is as impossible to fulfill as a dogma of *sola scriptura*. The first is impossible to achieve in human art, the second is impossible to begin. The artist, as well as the religious person, needs a principle of selection from among the elements God's realism offers, just as there was a principle of selection for that bugaboo of the contemporary university formerly known as the canon, and as there was for the socialist realist, who considered that "in order to reproduce properly what is, one must depict also what will be" (Camus 1995, 260) – namely the happy socialist state. It is interesting to note that Camus might well have had, besides the usual suspects, J-P Sartre also in mind, for Sartre had claimed, in "Existentialism as Humanism" that "existentialism [would] never take man as an end, for a man is always in a state of formation" (Sartre 1985, 50). Socialist realism is thus a version of Sartrean existentialism; this fits with his long defense of Stalin.

Before continuing further, let us note that the "universalist" views Camus is expressing here, while echoing the ancients, are not out of touch with what other modern artists have said. For example, Mark Rothko – whose painting would hardly count as traditionalist – considers that art is a form of social action, but its aim is not to produce ornaments for leisure, "soothe the savage breast of the weary warrior" (Rothko 2004, 12), or function for the direct good of the state or corporation, but rather to "constantly adjust eternity, as it were, to all the specifications of the moment" (Rothko 2004, 22). The artist's aim is not to "create partial unities, but...always resolve his fragments in man's subjectivity" (Rothko 2004, 31), creating through his art a plastic or poetic generalization of what the human reality is, thereby giving "human beings direct contact with eternal verities through reduction of those verities to the realm of sensuality" (Rothko 2004, 25). By this last term Rothko means not our usual sense, but rather that the painter creates a world in which we can, as it were, feel the edges, which are the edges of *our* world. A work which brings a palpable

unity of the eternal truth and present experience to a resolution in human subjectivity, would be one who "added to the inner freedom of each person who has known and loved it," as Camus thinks every true work of art does (Camus 1995, 241). To fail to do this is to be guilty of escapism – which can also be accomplished by spending one's "entire life turning the wheels of industry so that he has neither time nor energy to occupy himself with any other needs of his human organism" (Rothko 2004, 10), which is the preferred method of the citizens of Oran, a thoroughly modern city.

A similar dilemma, between titillation and socially defined grandeur can be heard in the Renaissance complaint of Michelangelo:

Ill hath he chosen his part who seeks to please
The worthless world, – ill hath he chosen his part,
For often he must wear the look of ease
When Grief is at his heart;
And often in his hours of happier feeling
With sorrow must his countenance be hung,
And ever his own better thoughts concealing
Must he in stupid Grandeur's praise be loud,
And to the errors of the ignorant crowd
Assent with lying tongue (Rothko 2004, 2).

At any rate, in both the socialist and the existentialist case – which latter is perhaps merely the general metaphysic underlying both totalitarian and bourgeois versions of barbarism – the end is defeated by the means again. In the latter case all ends are abandoned, so any at all may be set.¹⁵ Man's freedom is the purest nothing for Sartre, and so, as Dostoevsky put it, "everything is permitted." Any ends may be set. Then, too, anything is art. In the former socialist realist case, as Camus states it: "the aesthetic that intended to be realistic therefore becomes a new idealism [for the new socialist man does not exist really], just as sterile for the true artist as bourgeois realism. Reality is ostensibly granted a sovereign position only to be more readily thrown out. Art is reduced to nothing. It serves" (Camus 1995, 261). What it serves is the imagined future, which has the distinct disadvantage of not being real. Or perhaps it is an advantage – for the revolutionary can fill in the blank with whatever particular dream the day has given her. Here the anything that is art is cor-

¹⁵ A person envisages "a number of possibilities, and when they choose one, they realize that it has value only because it is chosen;" Sartre 1985, 21.

seted into that shape ordered by the political-economic futurist ideal. Futurism itself being one of those (now passé) ideals history seemed intent on realizing. These days such totalitarian barbarism is not so easily localizable as when Camus was writing. It can be found anywhere. Thus, "barbarism is never temporary" (Camus 1995, 262), and, thanks to our wonderfully advancing technology, it is not localizable in space either. In fact, we can see it breaking into nearly as many political coteries, with varying visions of the future, as there are coteries of art for art's sake academicisms, or, for that matter, Christian churches. Unlike the bourgeois "artistic" coteries – which have their select venues and journals, these totalitarian coteries are (thanks to social media) present everywhere. And those who disagree with them are now, as they were in Camus's day, "on the wrong side of history" – the history which is not yet real. Thus "the future authorizes every kind of humbug" (Camus 1995, 263).

It is not that the arts are necessary and sufficient for a non-barbarian human culture, for clearly rafts of art and artists are expressions, symptoms, and (junk) food for the variety of barbarians we have been considering. Camus's explication of these phenomena and people has only become weightier and more accurate since he wrote. These should be encouraged to step closer to the cliff edge to take a selfie. Rather, there must be a kind of art, literature in Camus's particular case, which aims at and succeeds in awakening and aiding the person into precisely that sort of rigorous consideration and acknowledgement of ends which mark those who are civilized. It is this that Camus thinks authentic art has as its end. Let us be clear before we go to that topic, however, that the existence of such art will not at all guarantee its success in drawing s a society, out of barbarism, though without it we can be certain what will succeed. That future is already here.

2. The work of the work of art

In a review of Jean Paul Sartre's novel, *Nausea*, published when he was not yet 25 and some four years before his own first effort in the art form, Camus outlined the difficult depths and dangerous shallows for an artist attempting this particular kind of "fusion of experience and thought, of life and reflection on the meaning of life." He begins by saying, "a novel is never anything but a philosophy expressed in images. And in a good novel the philosophy has disappeared into the images. But the philosophy need only spill over into the characters and action for it to stick out like a sore thumb, the plot to lose its authenticity, and the novel its life" (Camus 1970, 199). But how can philosophy be expressed in the images of a novel and yet not spill over into the characters and action, for clearly, what the characters do will provide quite a few of the significant images? To say nothing of those

characters speaking from some perhaps incipient or inchoate philosophical *point d'appui* themselves, or perhaps even a well-considered and developed philosophical worldview. And can that idea fit together with his later remark, written when planning the first version of *The Plague*, that the great novelists of the classical French tradition "refuse to carry messages, and their only concern seems to be to lead their characters imperturbably to the rendezvous awaiting them?" (Camus 1970, 210).

Camus thought that Sartre's novel, though it was perfect "in everything that concerns the mechanical side of existence" and contained as well profound ideas and reflections, broke the balance required in a great novel, thus becoming one of that sort of failure in which "the theories do damage to the life" (Camus 1970, 200). He is not accusing Sartre of being one of those who is unaware of, or acting contrary to the end of art, rather, despite its ideas and several perfections it doesn't "add up to a work of art.... [It fails] to evoke in the reader the deep conviction that makes an art of the novel" (Camus 1970, 199). Beside profound ideas and perfect descriptions, a great novel must evoke in the reader a conviction of life: that the world of the novel, or at least of the lives in it, is a world in which, or a life which, he and she too could be or are seen to live. One might be tempted to argue that Camus would, then, perhaps not consider magical realism, or science fiction, or something like Tolkien's legendarium as possibilities for greatness in literature, at least not for a novel, though I do not think such an argument follows at all from either what he has said or his practice as a writer. But this matter is not to the point. What is to the point is trying to show how he thinks a great novel works, and what balance it aims to accomplish, for that can give us better insight into his own practices and aims.

Camus's own reflections about the greatness of a novel does not touch upon any character's presentation of a philosophy (much less the author's philosophy, as we might think true of Sartre's Roquentin) *tout court* but upon the way the novel as a whole is (or is not) a lucid living mimesis of the containment of human suffering – as distant from chatter as from despair and madness, as distinct from magical fairy tale as from the kind of realism we find in Upton Sinclair, or Zola, or the metaphysics we might find dressed in Sartre. The authentic novelist's work "he characterizes as a tradition transcending historical periods" (Hughes 2007, 7). Though Camus determines himself, and particularly his authorship of *The Plague*, as the work of someone who does "not believe in realism in art" (Camus 1970, 340), he also describes that book, readable "on a number of levels," to be certainly "nothing less ... than a chronicle of the Resistance" (Camus 1970, 339). His realism is clearly not a literalism then, and the evocation of conviction he aims at is not merely that of a "this could happen" sort, though it is nothing less than that; rather, "the great problem is to translate what one feels into what one wants others to feel" (Camus 1970, 212). In the case of *The*

Plague, those feelings include the enclosing miasma of the occupation/plague/evil, its strictly limiting boredom and evacuation of meaning from language, enhanced by administrative regulation which provides its own structured absurdity. But such feelings are not limited to the past historical experience of the anti-Nazi resistance. As the novel can be read on many levels – plague, occupation, the persistence of evil, being but three – so the characters and events which instigate such feelings bring us to notice the ways in which we share in the sufferings of this "completely modern" city (Camus 1948, 4) and by sympathetically (or not) entering the characters' responses, the work of art might loosen "a tangle of obscure bonds within [us], free [us] from fetters whose hindrance [we] felt without being able to give them a name" (Camus 1970, 249), as Camus describes his own experience of a novel. What he aims to bring about, then depends partly on us, on our own ability to read, and recognize our own feelings and experience, and through the novel's working through of those feelings effecting a greater freedom in us. We will be both *in our* real occupied, or plague, or evil-inscribed lives and *able to see* that life and the lives of others with us as a whole, a sight which is only possible from without, from outside the walls of our particular reality – that is, *in the novel*. In such bifocality is freedom born and strengthened. Camus thinks that the great novel will have a sufficient variety of excellences that it will touch home in this way in everyone; that is how it carries "conviction of life," such as he found Sartre's first novel did not. That is how he can expect it to be of permanent value to all, as he holds is true of Greek tragedy, and the novels he calls classic.

Unfortunately, as a great artist, especially a novelist, becomes an icon, his work tends to become a mythologic expression of his openly expressed philosophy, his particular biography, or place in his culture,¹⁶ or his socio-economic and racial history, depending on which church the priestly reader or critic belongs to. As Edward Dahlberg once wrote, "The citizen secures himself against genius by icon worship. By the touch of Circe's wand, the divine troublemakers are translated into porcine embroidery" (Wallace 2005, 255). Certainly, the reason such a wide variety of critical churches exist is because such priests and priestesses can make considerable sense of the scripture (or other artistic work) that they are facing. As we might expect, and know from experience, some of these critics reveal the iconic author to be demonic,¹⁷ while others defend the icon as a prophet and forerunner of their own (Kelly 2007). As each church rises and falls in its popularity, so

¹⁶ These need not, of course, be simplistic *roman a clef* relations; cf. van der Poel 2007, 23: "Clemence, the protagonist, is not to be identified with his creator, Albert Camus, of course, yet some of the reflections on his personal life seem close to Camus's own...".

¹⁷ In the case of Camus, we might point to the work of Said 1994.

also does the icon and its significance. Tracing such fluctuations of interpretation and evaluation is the work of "reception theory:" a sort of history and sociology of religion, so understood. Iconography, as it were, becomes a separate field of study. This latter fact might bring us back to an older theory, one which I think Camus shares, about how great art works. In a phrase: "Such works are mirrors, when an ape looks in, no apostle can be seen looking out."¹⁸ The problem is that now we have whole school groups traveling through the museum of icons, each group shepherded by its own deacon or deaconess; the result is so much more noise that it is difficult to find a quiet spot from which to consider the work, a place to let us feel our own way through it – by which I mean, what is really for us in it. Camus puts the artist's problem this way: the artist must "find out how, among the police forces of so many ideologies (how many churches, what solitude!), the strange liberty of creation is possible" (Camus 1995, 251). The reader, too, must solve a similar problem.

Such churches, and the wealth of competing visitors and tour guides, insulate us from the genius, for to follow along in such a church disallows what the artist in his art aims to achieve – a "privileged moment" in which the work "acts on us like a great musician playing on a very ordinary instrument and truly *revealing* it to itself."¹⁹ The instrument, in the case of the artist, is the subjectivity of the reader. Neither the making of art, nor the enjoyment of art is a work of explication, but rather both are an emotionally accurate and intellectually clarified grasping and holding of – or being grasped and held in – our place in the world, such as we seldom achieve, or rarely appears so perfectly to us while in the contradictions and heat of battle (including its boredom) which is our life in the world. So for Camus, the work of art allows us to grasp in that present heat a completeness, finality and clarity which embattled life makes nearly impossible; it is this vision and passionate driving *through* the smoke and alarms *to* a whole in which we have our part which grants such freedom and peace as art may grant.

Accomplishing this, the work of art achieves its aim, which "can only be to increase the sum of freedom and responsibility to be found in every man" (Camus 1995, 240). The novel realizes this freeing work by making us more lucid about the life we are ourselves living. Titillation, the honing of political, economic, psychosexual and societal knives, or the working out of a catechetical proof are Charybdis, Scylla, and islands of the Cyclops – each proving a different method of destruction upon the work of the artist. Each produces a

¹⁸ The phrase is Lichtenberg's; I have it from the frontispiece of S. Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*.

¹⁹ This great image is from an essay by Camus's beloved teacher, Jean Grenier, quoted in Garfitt 2007, 30.

different enslavement or tooling – and perhaps arises from such slavery and toolishness in the reader. Many times it is also true of the author, but these are the barbarians. More accurate reading is an exercise in the "the growth of a personality" as Joseph Grand explains his own efforts in *The Plague* (Camus 1948, 40). In the novel itself we might be able to see such things at work, and hear them named, and understand how they have been moving us – in reality. Additionally, the works which survive the ever present, and increasingly enlarging dangers Camus has been pointing out belong to art, will also allow us "to indulge without restraint in the supreme joy of the intelligence which we call 'admiration'" (Camus 1995, 272). It is fitting that such a passion be aroused in us, as the virtue of the artist in the present world is almost as difficult of achievement as the virtue of the human being. For *ars brevis, vita longa est*; the work is easier to perfect.

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