CHAPTER 4

From Revolution to Rebellion: Camus with and against the Theorists of Dialogic Ethics

1 Beyond Nihilism, Sympathetic Imagination: Camus with Levinas

“Yes, there is a crisis of man when the death or torture of a [human] being can in our world be examined with a sentiment of indifference or of amiable curiosity . . . , or with simple passivity . . . ,” Albert Camus proclaimed to his American audience at the McMillan Theatre on 28 March 1946. Characteristically, rather than launch into declamations concerning first principles or exegesis of august authorities, Camus illustrated his meaning by narrating four concrete examples. All of these had been related to him by victims or witnesses. They dated from the six years of the European war, then finished for less than one year.

In the first, an SS guard, after torturing his two charges in what today would be called an ‘enhanced interrogation’ session, calmly took his petit déjeuner in front of the battered men. Reproached by one of them for the derisive humanity of this action, the guard replied calmly that “he never pays any mind to his lodgers”—for the make-shift prison was a requisitioned tenement building. Camus’ second example came from one of his resistance comrades. This man had his ear torn off, in another ‘enhanced interrogation session’ with the Nazis. His tormenter then approached him, leaned close to his bandaged head and asked with affected concern: “how are your ears?” Camus’ third story involved a classic Sophie’s choice: the kind of bizarre, catastrophic situation that still exercises moral philosophy classes. An aging Greek woman was forced by a German officer to choose which of three of her countrymen should be saved from execution: an impossible choice which served to make her inescapably complicit in the assassination of two others. The fourth story reads as uncannily contemporary in our world of unwanted asylum seekers. It involved a group of French women deported by the Germans. After the war ended, the women were to be repatriated to their homeland via Switzerland. Nevertheless, having arrived in this neutral nation, they found themselves shunted immediately,

there also, into civil detention. It was just as if they were already corpses, one of the women commented.846

What these examples illustrate for Camus is nothing short of a spiritual maladie affecting Europe. Its gravity Camus tries to impress upon his young American audience, in their relative peace and plenty, in precise terms:

Europe is sick when to put to death a human being is conceived otherwise than with the horror and scandal which it should arouse, when the torture of men there is admitted as a service which is a little irksome (ennuyeux), comparable to resupplying an inventory or the obligation to form a queue in order to obtain a ration of butter.847

If we are tempted, faced by the sheer enormity of the problem in a period “which, in a space of fifty years, uproots, enslaves, or kills seventy million human beings”848 to treat such atrocities “philosophically” Camus reminds us that any such stance of resigned acceptance is unthinkable for the victims: “…I believe it is impossible for those who have known torture to be able to say calmly…that after all it has always been thus…”849 For Camus, here again closely approaching ideas Hannah Arendt would soon explore, it is the sheer banality that organised, state-sanctioned crime assumed in the middle decades of the 20th century (“when death has become an affair of statistics and administration”)850 that makes the period at once so unique and profoundly horrifying. “It is not today as when Cain killed Abel!”, Camus reflected in 1949’s “Time of Murderers”: “today…Cain kills Abel in the name of logic and then claims the Legion of Honour…”851

L’Homme Révolté, Camus’ most extended philosophical essay of 1951, brings together the fruits of his political and philosophical reflections of the previous decade, including the decisive speeches: “The Crisis of Man”, “The Witness of Liberty”, and “The Time of Murderers”. Yet, thinking of the kinds of examples he brought to audiences’ attention in these pieces, this ‘book of ideas’ begins with an ethical urgency which marks it off from most livres of its genre. The Rebel’s opening gambits indeed recall the tone in which Camus’ younger