

Helen's Exile, Albert Camus

Helen's Exile1

The Mediterranean has a solar tragedy that has nothing to do with mists. There are evenings, at the foot of mountains by the sea, when night falls on the perfect curve of a little bay and an anguished fullness rises from the silent waters. Such moments make one realize that if the Greeks knew despair, they experienced it always through beauty and its oppressive quality.

In this golden sadness, tragedy reaches its highest point. But the despair of our world—quite the opposite—has fed on ugliness and upheavals. That is why Europe would be ignoble if suffering ever could be.

We have exiled beauty; the Greeks took arms for it. A basic difference but one that goes far back. Greek thought was always based on the idea of limits. Nothing was carried to extremes, neither religion nor reason, because Greek thought denied nothing, neither reason nor religion. It gave everything its share, balancing light with shade.

But the Europe we know, eager for the conquest of totality, is the daughter of excess. We deny beauty, as we deny everything that we do not extol. And, even though we do it in diverse ways, we extol one thing and one alone: a future world in which reason will reign supreme. In our madness, we push back the eternal limits, and at once dark Furies swoop down upon us to destroy. Nemesis, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance, is watching. She chastises, ruthlessly, all those who go beyond the limit.

The Greeks, who spent centuries asking themselves what was just, would understand nothing of our idea of justice. Equity, for them, supposed a limit, while our whole continent is convulsed by the quest for a justice we see as absolute. At the dawn of Greek thought, Heraclitus already conceived justice as setting limits even upon the physical universe itself: "The sun will not go beyond its bounds, for otherwise the Furies who watch over justice will find it out."

We, who have thrown both universe and mind out of orbit, find such threats amusing. In a drunken sky we ignite the suns that suit us. But limits nonetheless exist and we know it. In our wildest madness we dream of an equilibrium we have lost, and which in our simplicity we think we shall discover once again when our errors cease—an infantile presumption, which justifies the fact that childish peoples, inheriting our madness, are managing our history today.

A fragment attributed to the same Heraclitus states simply: "Presumption, regression of progress." And centuries after the Ephesian, Socrates, threatened by the death penalty, granted himself no superiority other than this: he did not presume to know what he did not know. The most exemplary life and thought of these centuries ends with a proud acknowledgment of ignorance. In forgetting this we have forgotten our virility. We have preferred the power that apes greatness—Alexander first of all, and then the Roman conquerors, whom our school history books, in an incomparable vulgarity of soul, teach us to admire. We have conquered in our turn, have set aside the bounds, mastered heaven and earth. Our reason has swept everything away.

Alone at last, we build our empire upon a desert. How then could we conceive that higher balance in which nature balanced history, beauty, and goodness, and which brought the music of numbers even into the tragedy of blood? We turn our back on nature, we are ashamed of beauty. Our miserable tragedies have the smell of an office, and their blood is the color of dirty ink. That is why it is indecent to proclaim today that we are the sons of Greece. Or, if we are, we are sons turned renegade. Putting history on the throne of God, we are marching toward theocracy, like those the Greeks called barbarians, whom they fought to

the death in the waters of Salamis.

If we really want to grasp the difference, we must look to the one man among our philosophers who is the true rival of Plato. "Only the modern city" Hegel dares to write, "offers the mind the grounds on which it can achieve awareness of itself." We live in the time of great cities. The world has been deliberately cut off from what gives it permanence: nature, the sea, hills, evening meditations. There is no consciousness any more except in the streets because there is history only in the streets, so runs the decree.

And, consequently, our most significant works demonstrate the same prejudice. One looks in vain for landscapes in the major European writers since Dostoevski. History explains neither the natural universe which came before it, nor beauty which stands above it. Consequently it has chosen to ignore them. Whereas Plato incorporated everything nonsense, reason, and myths our philosophers admit nothing but nonsense or reason, because they have closed their eyes to the rest. The mole is meditating. It was Christianity that began to replace the contemplation of the world with the tragedy of the soul. But Christianity at least referred to a spiritual nature, and therefore maintained a certain fixity.

Now that God is dead, all that remains are history and power. For a long time now, the whole effort of our philosophers has been solely to replace the idea of human nature with the idea of situation and ancient harmony with the disorderly outbursts of chance or the pitiless movement of reason. While the Greeks used reason to restrain the will, we have ended by placing the impulse of the will at the heart of reason, and reason has therefore become murderous. For the Greeks, values existed a priori and marked out the exact limits of every action.

Modern philosophy places its values at the completion of action. They are not, but they become, and we shall know them completely only at the end of history. When they disappear, limits vanish as well, and since ideas differ as to what these values will be, since there is no struggle which, unhindered by these same values, does not extend indefinitely, we are now witnessing the Messianic forces confronting one another, their clamors merging in the shock of empires. Excess is a fire, according to Heraclitus. The fire is gaining ground; Nietzsche has been overtaken.

It is no longer with hammer blows but with cannon shots that Europe philosophizes. Nature is still there, nevertheless. Her calm skies and her reason oppose the folly of men. Until the atom too bursts into flame, and history ends in the triumph of reason and the death agony of the species. But the Greeks never said that the limit could not be crossed. They said it existed and that the man who dared ignore it was mercilessly struck down. Nothing in today's history can contradict them.

Both the historical mind and the artist seek to remake the world. But the artist, through an obligation of his very nature, recognizes limits the historical mind ignores. This is why the latter aims at tyranny while the passion of the artist is liberty. All those who struggle today for liberty are in the final analysis fighting for beauty.

Of course, no one thinks of defending beauty solely for its own sake. Beauty cannot do without man, and we shall give our time its greatness and serenity only by sharing in its misery. We shall never again stand alone. But it is equally true that man cannot do without beauty, and this is what our time seems to want to forget.

We tense ourselves to achieve empires and the absolute, seek to transfigure the world before having exhausted it, to set it to rights before having understood it. Whatever we may say, we are turning our backs on this world. Ulysses, on Calypso's island, is given the choice between immortality and the land of his fathers. He chooses this earth, and death with it. Such simple greatness is foreign to our minds today.

Others will say that we lack humility, but the word, all things considered, is ambiguous. Like Dostoevski's buffoons who boast of everything, rise up to the stars and end by flaunting their shame in the first public place, we simply lack the pride of the man who is faithful to his limitations—that is, the clairvoyant love of his human condition. "I hate my time," wrote Saint-Exupéry before his death, for reasons that are not far removed from those I have mentioned.

But, however overwhelming his cry may be, coming from someone who loved men for their admirable qualities, we shall not take it as our own. Yet what a temptation, at certain times, to turn our backs on this gaunt and gloomy world. But this is our time and we cannot live hating ourselves.

It has fallen so low as much from the excess of its virtues as from the greatness of its faults. We shall fight for the one among its virtues that has ancient roots. Which virtue? Patroclus's horses weep for their master, dead in battle.

All is lost. But Achilles takes up the battle and victory comes at the end because friendship has been murdered: friendship is a virtue. It is by acknowledging our ignorance, refusing to be fanatics, recognizing the world's limits and man's, through the faces of those we love, in short, by means of beauty—this is how we may rejoin the Greeks. In a way, the meaning of tomorrow's history is not what people think.

It is in the struggle between creation and the inquisition. Whatever the price artists will have to pay for their empty hands, we can hope for their victory. Once again, the philosophy of darkness will dissolve above the dazzling sea. Oh, noonday thought, the Trojan war is fought far from the battleground! Once again, the terrible walls of the modern city will fall, to deliver Helen's beauty, "its soul serene as the untroubled waves."

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¹ This text, written in August 1948 and originally dedicated to the poet René Char, one of Camus's close personal friends, first appeared in the Cahiers du Sud in 1948. The ideas that it expresses form the basis for many of the political and philosophical arguments developed in L'Homme révolté (The Rebel) in 1951. —P.T.

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