

Intelligence and the Scaffold, Albert Camus

Intelligence and the Scaffold1

It is said that when Louis XVI, on his way to the guillotine, tried to give one of his guards a message for the queen, he drew the following reply: "I am not here to run your errands but to lead you to the scaffold." This excellent example of propriety in wording and obstinate perseverance to the job at hand is, it seems to me, perfectly applicable, if not to all the novels in our language at least to a certain classical tradition in the French novel.

Novelists of this genre do indeed refuse to carry messages, and their only concern seems to be to lead their characters imperturbably to the rendezvous awaiting them, whether it be Madame de Clèves to her convent, Juliette to happiness and Justine to her ruin, Julien Sorel to his beheading, Adolphe to his solitude, Madame de Graslin to her deathbed, or Proust to the celebration of old age he discovers in the salon of Madame de Guermantes.

What characterizes these authors is their singleness of purpose; one would look in vain through these novels for the equivalent of a Wilhelm Meister's interminable adventures; it is not that pedantry is foreign to us but that we have our own particular kind of pedantry, which is not, fortunately, Goethe's sort. All that can be said is that in art an ideal of simplicity always requires fixity of intention. Hence a certain obstinacy that seems central in the French novel.

This is why the problems of the novel are primarily artistic. If our novelists have proved anything, it is that the novel, contrary to general belief, cannot easily dispense with perfection. Only it is an odd sort of perfection, not always a formal one. People imagine—wrongly—that novels can dispense with style. As a matter of fact, they demand the most difficult style—the kind that does not call attention to itself.

But the problems our great novelists set themselves have not concerned form for form's sake. They focused only on the exact relationship they wished to introduce between their tone and their ideas. Somewhere between monotony and chit-chat they had to find a language to express their obstinacy.

If their language often lacks outward distinction it is because it is molded in a series of sacrifices. The messages have been omitted; everything is reduced to essentials. This is how minds as different as Stendhal's and Madame de La Fayette's may seem akin: both have worked hard to find the right language. Indeed, the first problem Stendhal set himself is the one that has preoccupied great novelists for centuries. What he called an "absence of style" was a perfect conformity between his art and his passions.²

For what gives originality to all [French] novels compared to those written in other countries is that they are not only a school of life but an artistic school: the liveliest flame crackles in their rigorous language. Our great successes are born of a particular concept of strength, which might be called elegance, but which needs to be defined.

One must be two persons when one writes. In French literature, the great problem is to translate what one feels into what one wants others to feel. We call a writer bad when he expresses himself in reference to an inner context the reader cannot know. The mediocre writer is thus led to say anything he pleases. The great rule of an artist, on the other hand, is to half forget himself the better to communicate.

Inevitably this involves sacrifices. And this quest for an intelligible language whose role is to disguise the immensity of his objective leads him to say not what he likes but only what he must. A great part of the genius of the French

novel lies in the conscious effort to give the order of pure language to the cries of passion. In short, what triumphs in the works I am discussing is a certain preconceived idea.

I mean intelligence. But the term needs definition. One always tends to think of intelligence as involving only what is visible—structure, for example. Now it is curious to note that the structure of the typical seventeenth-century novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*, is extremely loose.

Several stories are launched and the novel begins in complexity even though it ends in unity. Actually, we have to wait for *Adolphe*, in the nineteenth century, to find the purity of line we are so ready to imagine we find in *La Princesse de Clèves*. In the same way, the structure of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is purely chronological, with no artistic experiments. In Sade's novels the composition is elementary; philosophical dissertations alternate with erotic descriptions right to the end.

Stendhal's novels offer curious evidence of carelessness, and one is never surprised enough at the final chapter of *La Chartreuse de Parme*, in which the author, as if anxious to conclude, with the end in sight, bundles in twice as many events as in the rest of the book. It is surely not these examples which justify the claim that French novels possess an Apollonian perfection of form.

The unity, the profound simplicity, the classicism of these novels thus lie elsewhere. It is surely closer to the truth to say merely that the great characteristic of these novelists is in the fact that each, in his own way, always says the same thing and always in the same tone. To be classic is to repeat one's self. And thus at the heart of our great works of fiction one finds a certain conception of man that intelligence strives to illustrate by means of a small number of situations.

And, of course, this can be said of any good novel, if it is true that novels create their universe by means of intelligence, just as the theater creates its universe by means of action.

But what seems peculiar to the French tradition is that plot and characters are generally limited to this idea and everything is arranged so as to make it echo on indefinitely. Here, intelligence not only contributes the original idea; at the same time it is also a marvelously economical principle that creates a kind of passionate monotony.

It is both creative and mechanical at the same time. To be classical is both to repeat oneself and to know how to repeat oneself. And this is the difference I see between French novels and those of other countries, where intelligence inspires the fiction but also allows itself to be carried away by its own reactions.³

To take a specific example, it seems to me that *Madame de La Fayette's* aim, since nothing else in the world appears to interest her, is simply to show us a very special conception of love. Her strange postulate is that this passion places man in peril. And while this is something one might say in conversation, no one ever thinks of pushing the logic quite so far as she did.

What one feels at work in *La Princesse de Clèves*, *La Princesse de Montpensier*, or *La Comtesse de Tende* is a constant mistrust of love. It is apparent in her very language, where certain words really seem to burn in her mouth: "What *Madame de Clèves* had said about his portrait had restored him to life by making him realize that it was he whom she did not hate." But in their own way, the characters also convince us that this healthy suspicion is valid.

They are strange heroes, who die of emotion, who seek mortal illness in thwarted passions. Even the minor characters die through impulses of the soul: "He received his pardon when he was expecting only the death blow, but fear had so possessed him that he went mad and died a few days later." Our most audacious

Romantics never dared attribute such powers to passion. Faced with such ravages of feeling, it is easy to understand why Madame de La Fayette makes an extraordinary theory of marriage as a less evil the mainspring of her plot: better to be unhappily married than to suffer from passion.

Here is the deep-seated idea whose obstinate repetition gives her work its meaning. It is one idea of order. Long before Goethe, in fact, Madame de La Fayette balanced the injustice of an unhappy condition against the disorder of the passions; and long before him, in an amazing act of pessimism, she chose injustice, which leaves everything untouched. The order she is concerned with is less simply a wordy one than that of a soul and a system of ideas.

And far from wishing to make passions of the heart the slave of social prejudice, she uses these prejudices as a remedy for the disorderly impulses that terrify her. She is not interested in defending institutions they do not concern her; but she does wish to protect the core of her being, whose only enemy she knows. Love is nothing but madness and confusion. It is not hard to guess what burning memories surge beneath such disinterested phrases, and it is this, far more than deceptive questions of structure, that offers us a great lesson in art.

For there is no art where there is nothing to be overcome, and we realize then that the monotony of this ceremonious harmony is as much the result of clear sighted calculation as of heartrending passion.

There is only one feeling present, because it has consumed all others, and it speaks always in the same rather formal tone because it is not allowed to shout. Such objectivity is a victory. Other writers, who can offer lessons but who achieve no such victories, have tried to be objective, because they were capable of nothing else.

This is why the novelists who are called naturalists or realists, who have written so many novels and many good ones, have not written a single great one. They could not go beyond description. The grandeur of this lofty art in Madame de La Fayette, on the other hand, is that we are made to feel her limits have been put there on purpose.

Immediately they disappear, and the whole work vibrates. This is the result of a studied art that owes everything to intelligence and its attempt to dominate. But it is quite obvious that such art is also born of an infinite possibility of suffering, and a firm decision to master suffering by means of language. Nothing expresses this disciplined distress, this powerful light with which intelligence transfigures pain, better than an admirable sentence from *La Princesse de Clèves*: "I told him that so long as his suffering had had limits, I had approved of it and shared it; but that I would pity him no longer if he gave way to despair and lost his reason." The tone is magnificent. It assumes that a certain strength of soul can impose limits on misery by censoring its expression.

It introduces art into life by giving man the power of language in his struggle against his destiny. And thus we see that if this literature is a school for life, it is precisely because it is a school of art. To be more accurate, the lesson of these lives and these works of art is no longer simply one of art, but one of style. We learn from them to give our behavior a certain form. And this permanent truth, which Madame de La Fayette never stops repeating, which she expresses in this sentence in unforgettable form, takes on its full significance and illuminates what I mean when we realize that the very man who says it (the Prince of *Clèves*) will nonetheless die of despair.

It would be easy to find in Sade, in Stendhal, in Proust, and in a few contemporary writers similar lessons in style and life, very different in each case, but always made up of a choice, a calculated independence, and a clarity of aim. The perseverance in sin legitimized in Sade,⁴ the litanies of energy in Stendhal,⁵ Proust's heroic effort to portray human suffering within a wholly privileged existence—all say one thing and nothing else. Out of a single feeling

that has become a part of them forever, these writers create works that are both various and yet monotonous.

Of course, all I am doing here is making a few suggestions. Perhaps they are enough to demonstrate that the rigor, the purity, and the concentrated force of French classical fiction do not stem purely from its qualities of form (in any case, such a term has no meaning in art), but from the stubborn clinging to a certain tone, a certain constancy of soul, and a human and literary knowledge of sacrifice. Such classicism is a matter of deliberate choices (*partis pris*).⁶

The cult of the efficacy of intelligence creates not only an art but also a civilization and a way of life. It's possible, of course, that such an attitude has limitations. But perhaps they are necessary ones. We tend nowadays to undervalue lucid effort. And we are very proud of the universality of our taste. But perhaps this universality diminishes our inner strength. To someone who asked Newton how he had managed to construct his theory, he could reply: "By thinking about it all the time." There is no greatness without a little stubbornness.

In any case, this is how I explain the very strong feeling I have about our great novels. They prove the effectiveness of human creation. They convince one that the work of art is a human thing, never human enough, and that its creator can do without dictating from above. Works of art are not born in flashes of inspiration but in a daily fidelity. And one of the real secrets of the French novel is its ability to show at the same time a harmonious sense of fatality and an art that springs wholly from individual liberty—to present, in short, the perfect domain in which the forces of destiny collide with human decisions.

Its art is a revenge, a means of overcoming a difficult fate by imposing a form upon it. From the French novel one learns the mathematics of destiny, which are a means of freeing ourselves from destiny. And if the Prince of Clèves shows that in spite of everything he is superior to the tremors of a susceptibility that will kill him, it is because he is capable of forming that admirable sentence which refuses to depict madness and despair.

None of our great novelists has turned his back on human suffering, but we can also say that none has surrendered to it and that they have all mastered it with an inspiring patience, through the discipline of art. A contemporary Frenchman owes his idea of virility perhaps (and naturally his virility needs no beating on the drum) to this series of incisive, scorching works in which the superior exercise of an intelligence that cannot keep from dominating moves unflinchingly forward, to the very scaffold.

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1 The initial notes for "Intelligence and the Scaffold" appear in Camus's *Carnets II*, pp. 60-1 (Alfred A. Knopf edition, pp. 44-5). Since at the time Camus was planning the first version of *The Plague* it is perhaps useful to bear in mind the ideas he expresses in this essay when discussing the construction of that novel. *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*) also contains a long discussion of the Marquis de Sade and Proust. —P.T.

2 "If I am not clear, my whole world is destroyed." (Stendhal).

3 In Russian novels, for example, or in such experiments as James Joyce's.

4 "He invented cruelties he never practiced himself, and which he would have no desire to practice, in order to enter into contact with the great problems" (Otto Flake). The great problem for de Sade is man's irresponsibility without God. Camus noted down this judgment on Sade in *Carnets I*, p. 249, in 1942 (Alfred A. Knopf edition, pp. 208-9). —P.T.

5 The remark by the Prince of Clèves can be Juxtaposed with this notation in Stendhal's Journal: "As often happens to men who have concentrated their energy on one or two vital points, he had an indolent and careless look."

6 This is why Francis Ponge's *Le Parti pris des choses* is one of the few classical works of our day. Francis Ponge (born 1899) is known for his minute descriptions of individual physical objects. A long letter from Camus to Ponge, in which he described *Le parti pris des choses* as "an absurd work in the purest sense of the term" was published in the *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* in September 1956. It was written in 1943 in reply to a letter from Ponge to Camus, and is reprinted in *Pléiade II*, pp. 1662-6. -P.T.

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