

## **The Cult of Violence Revisited**

### **Book Review-Essay, Revised**

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*Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation*. Edited and translated by David A. Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven. (Humanity Books, 2004) 299 pp.

*Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended it*. By Ronald Aronson. (The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 291 + x pp.

The names of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre are probably permanently wedded. Their wartime friendship, then bitter falling-out over the Cold War, affords a telling drama in one of the most important schools of twentieth-century thought at a decisive turn in its evolution. It was a clarifying moment. Its immediate result was the discrediting of Left anti-Communism in the figure of Camus and the unrivaled ascendancy of Sartre as the pre-eminent radical intellectual, not only in France. But it also had deeper consequences and ramifications. The quarrel of Camus and Sartre captures the unique convergence of politics and philosophy at a critical juncture, the reconfiguration of the Left after the defeat of Fascism and the Soviet triumph. Occurring during the imposition of “proletarian democracy” on Central Europe and Communist aggression in the Korean War, this is one of the most important events after the Second World War, besides the Cold War itself. In retrospect, it records the opening acts of what would become, by the Sixties, the New Left.

In origin an intellectual and academic phenomenon, this reconfiguration would have far-reaching effects, especially with the Vietnam War. It crystallized in a political “gnosticism”—a disincarnate politics detached from the body politic and standing on its head, the abstract passions of equality and the philosophical conceits of radical “emancipation.” The Cold War supplied the occasion of its debut, the refusal to defend Western democracy against Communism, on the pretext that bourgeois society was certainly no better, perhaps even worse, than Soviet or nascent Third-World totalitarianism. The French Left was exemplary both in this respect and in the intellectual sophistication with which it expressed it. Practically, this meant (among

other things) that the Left intelligentsia abandoned the political sovereignty of the “nation,” a basic condition of modern self-government, and was prepared to defend or defer to Leninist violence or autocracy in other countries, in the name of “peace” or “freedom.” Philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, for example, crafted apologetics of the Soviet Union just as there was serious talk among them of the possibility of an invasion. This was not the only threshold crossed by the post-War *non-Communist* Western Left. Later, there would be the ethics of entitlement and “victimology,” after the decay of the civil rights movement, and the “sexual politics” of extremist feminism and its fall-out. But it was a critical threshold, conditioning the others. As “philosophical politics,” political Existentialism was virtually defined by a metaphysical allergy to reality, an antipathy to actual conditions of political life or the most evident moral facts. The story of Camus and Sartre retains its interest today, despite its dated idiom and the tedium of its quasi-Marxist myths. It carries us back to the buried origins of the contemporary academic Left.

This was not merely a political event; it was prophetic for Western democratic culture as a whole. In later Sartrean Existentialism, philosophy was politicized as politics became “philosophical,” something possible only in the rarified, aesthetic world of “culture.” The genome of this new kind of “literary politics,” as Raymond Aron called it (following Tocqueville), lay in a crossbreed of media-driven popular culture in the age of democracy, with the *avant garde* philosophy and aesthetics of revolutionary thinkers of prior generations such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. Marx and Nietzsche could now be revered as icons within a bourgeois culture tailored to the democracy of emergent consumerism—revolt as a cult, a life-style, the rebel without a cause. In their own time, Marx or Nietzsche had been marginal figures, in exile from respectable institutions (such as the university), attacking bourgeois society from the periphery. Those today classified in college bulletins as “the Nineteenth century philosophers”—Schopenhauer, Schelling, Feuerbach, Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche—found it necessary (by force or choice) to exit the university or be marginalized within it (like Schopenhauer, who built his reputation by writing for a larger educated audience). The official, academic philosophers of the same time are all but unknown, except to professors. There are really two histories of Nineteenth century thought. These philosophical black sheep were or became genuine

outsiders, attacking the inside from out. Ironically, today they have been wholly adopted by the academy. For the radical intellectual, the critical outsider, resurfaced as a creature of the establishment, if only in the realm of (and thanks to) popular culture, as a celebrity, a highly successful writer, or as a celebrated professor, in the academy. And Sartre was an original type of this new, 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon (as was Heidegger before him). His refusal of the Nobel Prize in 1964 shows how much a part of the establishment he was. He exemplified a quasi-revolutionary intelligentsia that disowned “bourgeois” democracy, yet resided in every sense within its ambit. Attacking it relentlessly but never intending to overthrow it, it might idolize Lenin but had no interest in living in a Communist state. (One may think of Slavoj Žižek or Alain Badiou, for example, as the decaying elements of this tradition today, in which the difference between inside and outside, official academia and emancipatory culture, no longer matters). Its aim was not to destroy liberal democracy but to subvert its legitimacy, to negate its validity but not its actuality. Radicalizing it internally, ironically, it exploited a potential within modern society itself—what Marx himself had despised and feared as the “bourgeois revolution.” By now, apparently, that has realized Marx’s worst fears, as the only real revolution in the modern world—not the proletarian revolution of socialist fantasy, but the cultural revolution of “emancipatory” freedom, a kind of moral and cultural anarchism, within the framework of free market or consumer-driven economies. Existentialism signified not a political or economic transformation of liberal democracy, but a revolution in the popular culture that primed its metabolism. It was not alone in this respect; one might also see psychoanalysis and surrealism and other modern movements in this connection. Under the banner of “committed” writing (Sartre’s postwar slogan, after renouncing the literature of novel-writing as bourgeois)—aiming at a radicalizing effect by appealing to existential “freedom”—Sartre entered the lists as (in effect) a cultural revolutionary, behind the disguise of politics. This is an original instance of what has since come to be known as “cultural politics.” The tectonic fissure between radical and official academic philosophy from the preceding century had begun to close, and in a big way.

In 1951, Camus forced the issue of the Cold War with *L’Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*, 1956), a critique of revolutionary nihilism from Hegel through Marx and Nietzsche (and many others) as “rational murder.” Nineteenth-century historicists like

Marx and Hegel had effectually armed mass violence with philosophical theories and endowed it with a sacred aura. In the name of emancipation, historicism turned cruelty and the thirst for unlimited power into ends in themselves. Scandalously, Camus implied that this tradition culminated in Existentialism itself, which made its underlying motif express. (In fact, this is virtually an obvious proposition if one takes Alexandr Kojève into account, the Russian émigré Hegelian (and Husserlian/Heideggerian/Nietzschean) Marxist who inspired much of Twentieth century French thought with his forceful reading of the master/slave dialectic and the violent struggle for recognition, in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806).) As Camus sensed early on, Sartre was pulled by a strange magnetism to political violence—under the pretext of History—as if it were the quintessence of being. To Sartre, the appeal of “revolution” was metaphysical, even theological; it intimated a higher order of reality than average everydayness, a sacred interruption of the profane. By Camus' untimely death in 1960, he cast the revolutionary moment (like the storming of the Bastille) in nearly religious terms, virtually a sacrificial act generating “group fusion” through collective violence against a common rival, a humiliating oppressor. Revolutionary mob violence was thus the key to overcoming “alienation” in the later Sartre. The germ of this line of thought can be found much earlier, though; it was latent in Sartre's masterwork, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), which saw alienation as constitutive of the human condition, the normal state of freedom. To Sartre, human relations inevitably contain an at least psychological violence, reciprocal terror, or aggression. Conflict is constitutive of the human. His wartime play *No Exit* (1944) brilliantly enacts this anthropological fact. Sartre sought to escape it through collective “historical” action, only to be thrust back into it by the existential finality of the fact itself. Only a permanent state of revolution could finally transcend alienation. This served all the better, though, as a pretext for endless revolt against the existing order. His paradigm of freedom is finally the annihilation of another, as long as that is an “oppressor,” a humiliating rival of the oppressed class, preferably through mass action. As Ronald Aronson noted, violence for Sartre is a “token of the real,” a defining act of human freedom, negation in the form of negativity. It is the self-creation of man, a revelation of “being.” In *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), the hatred that galvanizes revolt—rather than its theoretical goal—holds the promise of solidarity.

Emancipation lies not in an ideal end-state but in the bloody insurrection the imagination of it inspires.

Rather than confront his friend directly, Camus presented him with a book, to which a genuine response was never truly forthcoming. His indictment of “European pride” didn’t incite his quarrel with Sartre so much as force a collision that had been ripening for some time. The intellectual Left was offended, and no doubt was intended to be so. Here was a gauntlet thrown down by a lifelong man of the Left himself. The argument of the book and also the personality of Camus were not answered so much as merely rejected. Sartreans responded by treating Camus not as a serious interlocutor but the personification of a type. They justified this tack by pointing out Camus’ errors as a scholar of philosophy, his limitations as a thinker, and the faults of his style. The principal strategy was not seriously to debate but to accuse, expose, stigmatize, and ridicule. The core issue, the sacralization of violence, was simply ignored.

Sartre wouldn’t write the original review himself, though he published his own position shortly afterwards in the articles later assembled in *The Communists and Peace* (1964). Instead, he assigned it to a protégé, Francis Jeanson, an emerging Sartre scholar who also happened to be a political fanatic apparently with an axe to grind against Camus. That provoked a brief and acrimonious exchange when Sartre did enter the fray with a vicious polemic against the “being” of Camus, so to say, in his journal *Les Temps modernes*. This terminated their friendship, after which he accelerated his mutation into a “fellow traveler,” a non-Communist apologist for the Soviet Union and later for Maoism and Third-World terrorism. Camus was left isolated, within the intelligentsia if not within the larger world, and to some extent publicly humiliated as an anti-Communist. This was compounded by his dilemmas over French colonialism, as war erupted in his native Algeria. Trapped in an insoluble quandary, his “complicities” in colonialism ostensibly lent credence to the untenability of his stance and Sartre’s victory as the new don of the intellectual Left.

After fifty years mostly dominated by the “justice of the victors,” the story of the Camus-Sartre quarrel is now told in illuminating detail, in these two important and complementary books. David Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven’s *Sartre and Camus* supplies the original documents in which the quarrel broke open, the exchange in Sartre’s

journal *Les Temps modernes* between Sartre, Camus, and Jeanson provoked by the latter's original review, plus an unpublished reply by Camus. These are contextualized by a preface and introduction, followed by two commentaries, by the Sartrean William McBride and by Jeffrey Isaac (the best essay in the book, a defense of Camus). In *Camus and Sartre*, Ronald Aronson, a Sartrean with second thoughts who has come to appreciate Camus' virtues, threads together a composite philosophical and political biography of the main actors and their supporting cast, such as Arthur Koestler, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Simone de Beauvoir. Sartre's eager second in the duel, de Beauvoir, recorded the "official" history of the affair in her memoirs and her novel of the Paris intelligentsia, titled (without irony) *The Mandarins* (1954). This set the seal on his triumph. Aronson suggests a "hell hath no fury" element here, which may explain why de Beauvoir comes off as the Madame Defarge of French Existentialism in this confrontation.

The earlier polemic of Koestler and Merleau-Ponty prepared that between Camus and Sartre, who were mentored respectively by them in the forties. Recently part of the circle of Sartre and de Beauvoir, Koestler in 1946 made a huge impact with the French translation of *Darkness at Noon*, his famous novel of Bolshevik cannibalism based on the confession of Nicolai Bukharin in the Moscow Show Trials. Merleau-Ponty replied polemically with *Humanism and Terror* (1948), as brilliantly written as it was perversely argued, defending the Trials as deformed but under the circumstances excusable revolutionary violence. Any crime could be justified so long as it was committed in the name of Proletarian Emancipation, an argument all the more striking for being cast not in orthodox Marxist but in purely philosophical, existentialist terms, causally garbed in Marxian conceits, such as the Proletariat as the "Revolutionary Class." Unlike Marxism, the utopian future never actually arrives; emancipation so imagined was (as Raymond Aron suggested) a "Kantian ideal," perpetually receding as it was approached. Its main function is to hover over the present so as to render it morally indeterminate or reversible, since truth is decided only by the future—one that never arrives. Given Western liberalism's own incredibly violent origins in revolution, slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and the depredations of the industrial revolution (and thus the hypocrisy of liberal moralism), Marxist violence cannot be condemned as long as the possibility exists that the terror of today might lead to the freedom and prosperity of tomorrow. Since that

can't be ruled out a priori, the justification of violence is potentially unlimited. Merleau-Ponty's dialectic effectively inverted ends and means, making violence an end in itself expressing emancipatory desire. It legitimated an exponential intensification of violence in the name of abolishing it altogether, while condemning liberal attempts to contain it as tacit cover for it. With consummate forensic skill, Merleau-Ponty did not conceal evident moral and political realities in Soviet life (as communists did) but uprooted political judgment from any grounding in them. It did not deny reality but inverted it. The great achievement of his argument—from the point of view of an emergent post-modern Left—was to *volatilize* moral and political reality, to put it *out of play* in political reasoning, to suspend its force, so as to give full power to pure intentionality. Violence cannot be justified, but to the extent it is inevitable, it draws its force not from calculative reason but from aims. And so Existentialism invented an intellectual apology for terrorism and totalitarianism, in the name of ending violence and of emancipation. (Merleau-Ponty came to regret this argument, but that was too late to have any influence on Sartre, with whom, like Camus, he broke.) Its bourgeois self-hatred and contempt of liberalism was so great that it even found ways to romanticize the left-wing equals of Hitler. This hardened Camus' conviction that Marxism, Hegelianism, and their twentieth-century progeny fantasized philosophical murder in the name of Freedom and Reason, while it afforded Sartre a scheme of history cast in quasi-Marxist terms he would henceforth never give up.

*Sartre and Camus* and *Camus and Sartre* reflect a Left shaped far more by Sartre than by Camus, even as they wish to see justice done at long last to the latter. They have the feel of a myth in process of decomposition not yet complete. They remain captive to its effects, even as they unravel the family secrets. They still suffer from the original sin of political Existentialism, its conflation of philosophy and politics, the Sartrean fallacy par excellence. Excepting Jeffrey Isaac, in the figure of Camus the writers confront a ghost of the Left itself, a sacrificial victim, and they still do not know quite what to do.

Aronson's book is particularly striking in this respect. At once fascinating and disappointing, its narrative is rich with insights and revelations, yet suggests conclusions other than those Aronson draws himself. The latter are not nearly as inspired as the narrative itself, as it contrives an unconvincing reconciliation of Sartre and Camus in the

ether of scholarship. His central thesis is that the quarrel and its fall-out were a “tragedy of the Left,” in which Cold War pressures compromised its principles and brought out (in an idiom basic to Existentialism) the “bad faith” in each. What is required is to rescue both parties from their “bad faith,” so that the Left can learn from each, from Sartre’s “realism” and Camus’ “moralism.” But nowhere is a convincing synthesis offered, nor does any seem likely.

To develop this thesis, Aronson uses the promising motif that “the personal is the political.” The identity of the personal and the political lies at the core of Existentialist politics, thanks to the exigencies of its theatrical notion of freedom. Existentialism is philosophy as drama in which the thinker casts himself as a hero, and politics is its stage. Centering on the radical intellectual as he makes his debut in the world, it advances a public ethics based (paradoxically) on the individual, his freedom and projects. Its anthropology reflects the vexed transactions of private man, as he inhabits a public universe, helplessly exposed to the view of others. Its theme is the individual who makes his entrance into society, wrestling the threatening “looks,” “gazes,” and “stares” of those whom, nonetheless, he needs in order to “be.” No wonder the ethics deferred throughout but then promised at the very end of *Being and Nothingness* pans out as politics instead. Even intimacy it conceives as an agon of egos ultimately in front of others. What drove Sartre to the cult of violence and the fetishism of revolution were the demands not just of justice but of the “pursuit of being” as a “committed” writer. If Sartre gave up novel writing, it was in order to turn politics into drama and literature. Aronson himself strikingly observes that for Sartre, violence confers “being” on an individual by stripping it of someone else, a theme sounded in his notorious Preface to Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), in which he praises terrorism. He doesn’t see, though, how this reflects the histrionic demands of freedom as a mythic creature of popular culture. Existentialist politics acts out the self-image of *homo existentialis* as a knight of “authentic” freedom against those scripted as its enemies on a public stage (like the bourgeois “bastards” in *Nausea*). Camus gradually withdrew from this stage; Sartre sought to dominate it.

The personal and the political never merge convincingly in Aronson, as he dances around the nuclear core of the issue, the relation of philosophy and politics. Like the



“metastable” oscillations of bad faith itself, Aronson’s account alternates back and forth between the abstract poles of the personal and the political, without finding their coordination. It inhabits a rarefied world in which the personal and the political are all there is, the world of the radical activist. Beneath the personal and the political, though, are the concrete middle terms of civil society and its intermediate associations of every variety. Society is more like a rich texture of multiple threads woven across each other in a dense tangle without ceasing to be fluid. Individuals sustain multiple roles and complex identities as they occupy many positions in this three dimension whole at once. Existentialism is a social view of man in which society itself is paradoxically invisible. Society in its complexity disappears from this utterly social view of the individual. Sartre’s analysis of human relations is a pure distillation of democratic desire, yet oblivious to this fact. It reveals democratic passions by acting them out rather than by eliciting their structure from the transformation of personal relations by equality. This history-obsessed philosophy can’t put “the personal is the political” into historical context. This is the rise of democracy and its spontaneous paganism, popular culture. It is precluded from a theory of modernity because it casts democratic relations as “ontology,” a structural a priori.

Aronson strives to maintain a perfect balance sheet, in which debits and credits one after the other cancel themselves out. Both were right, both were wrong; each had valid arguments, and each was finally in bad faith. It is too neat, and Aronson’s own acute perceptions belie it. To assume parity between the sibling rivals of Existentialism really amounts to a defensive effort to save Sartre’s political honor, while conceding Camus’ rightness on what really matters. At a subtler level, though, it tacitly shields the myths of the academic Left. Surely, one cannot do justice to Camus, as these books seek to do, without rethinking all the way down the attitudes that came to dominate the Left especially after Vietnam. That includes “philosophical politics,” invented by intellectuals who must at all costs demonstrate their “freedom.”

To avoid this reckoning, Camus seems cast in the role of tragic hero of these volumes, in typical terms of *hubris* and *hamartia*. As in classical aesthetics, the pride of the hero is an indirect apology (in both senses) for his victimization and serves tacitly to sanction his sacrifice. As if what caused the break were the personal inflexibility of

Camus amplified by the cruel mechanics of Cold War pressures. Aronson's own account, though, permits one to construct a different picture. Camus' book afforded Sartre an occasion to declare openly what had long been gestating, his progression into the orbit of Stalinism and ultra-Leftism (for which Merleau-Ponty later took him to task, in *The Adventures of the Dialectic*, 1955). And it afforded him an opportunity to savage his erstwhile friend, first indirectly through a proxy and then directly in a remarkably brutal personal attack, a *tour de force* of verbal murder. Subterranean differences had divided them; now they burst ruthlessly open. The nature and cruelty of this attack was not accidental but essential to the dialectic of their relation. As Aronson shows, Sartre had always jealously admired Camus' prestige as an editor of *Combat*, a prominent underground newspaper of the Occupation, and his passage towards revolutionary politics was an attempt at once to imitate and to displace him. Sartre was bent on creating himself a writerly revolutionary, by means of his literary and philosophical voice. In 1945, he founded *Les Temps modernes*, his own journal of philosophical politics, dedicated to the Marxesque idea of "commitment" later expanded in *What is Literature?* (1948). He dreamed of becoming "engaged" in the world of real men, a writer who could take heroic risks by putting himself in service of "proletarian" causes deemed to represent historic emancipation. What earlier attracted him to Camus was the latter's cachet as a hero of the Resistance, and now he was in a position to trump him. After the Occupation, the image of the Resistance grew to mythic dimensions in Sartre's literary imagination, giving his philosophy a dramatic air and tacitly inflating his own role. This exaggerated figure, the hero of the Resistance, became a quasi-political ideal, inextricably intertwined with his notion of authentic being. As Aronson shows, he took Camus as his paradigm, inflating his stature in order cunningly to inflate his own. In the existential imagination, there was scarcely any difference between actual combat and editing an underground newspaper by that name. The demand that the writer become "committed" in effect made the writer a hero in his own drama. In constructing the writer as a man of action taking a stand, one freedom appealing to others, he turned action into writing, and the writer into an actor. In an earlier book on Sartre, Aronson showed how the trajectory of his philosophical thought was driven by his craving for being, authenticity, reality, revolting against the bourgeois captivity to the literary

imagination of his childhood, described in *The Words* (1964), a captivity he confessed he never overcame. Absurdly, Sartre contrasted himself to Camus as the practical man of action immersed in “concrete” history, as opposed to the political romantic whose moral retreat into himself served as a pretext for abstention and a tacit apology for the status quo.

Their friendship thus belied an underlying rivalry, the evidence for which adduced by Aronson suggests that it emanated mainly from Sartre. Camus was a proud and sensitive man, perhaps because of his working-class, Algerian origins, but Sartre was a jealous one, though he could mask this with generosity and camaraderie. In Camus he discovered everything he wasn't—attractive, spontaneous, courageous, politically engaged from youth, working-class, and so forth—a real *hombre* by Sartrean standards. Camus was fiercely independent, by all accounts uncalculating in his political positions, and morally unintimidated by their risks. He was certainly no politician. But the bourgeois in revolt against being bourgeois needs a victim, a body to stand over, to show what he isn't. And that is most effective if it is the body of the one whom he most jealously admires, robbing him of his glory. By destroying Camus personally in polemic, Sartre created himself as the authentic hero, the true man of action. Sartre may have been quiescent during the occupation, while Camus was risking his life to distribute a newspaper. But after the war, the tables were turned: now it was Camus who was, implicitly, the collaborator. Camus was cast as a “beautiful soul” (originally by Jeanson), a classic type from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a pure-hearted romantic who demanded the impossible so as *not* to act, thus in secret complicity with actual immorality—the supreme paradigm of bad faith by the lights of Jeanson and Sartre. The original man of commitment was now exposed as an imposter. Even worse, his anti-communism was stigmatized as tacit collaboration with the Right. Thus Sartre stole the jewel to stick into his crown.

Aronson is surely right that this event signaled a tragedy of the Left, though it remains to decipher what this tragedy is. Aronson does not want to admit that their friendship was superficial and their differences deep, though his own rich narrative suggests this, or that the Cold War was from the Western point of view inevitable and valid, despite its sins. The Soviets did not liberate Eastern Europe; they enslaved it for

another forty-five years under a regime as brutal (if not by that time as genocidal) as that of the Nazis. A refusal to acknowledge this betrays totalitarianism on the Left. But for all its crude effects, the Cold War made apparent just how irreconcilable the philosophical arcs of Camus and Sartre were. Solidified during the Occupation on the basis of their literary affinities and bohemian vices, their friendship masked profound differences the Cold War forced into the open. Sartre famously said he never felt so free as when he was in a German POW camp, but that sort of exigent fraternity (anticipating his later “group in fusion”) typically masks real differences by forging solidarity on the basis of enmity. The ideological pressures, no doubt, were distorting and coercive, as the Cold War was the occasion of crimes and excesses on the Western side too. But normally, that is what “history” is—messy—and things were not any different, at bottom, then when one had to choose between the liberal regime and Nazism. That is a choice no serious person would contest—except of course the pre-War Communists, who in 1933 called liberal and social democrats “social fascists,” perversely facilitating Hitler’s rise to power and later collaborating with him to start WWII with the Hitler-Stalin pact.

The clash of liberal democracy and totalitarianism did not merely aggravate differences in character and temperament in Camus and Sartre; it exposed irreducible oppositions in their core principles and spiritual ambitions. From a common point of departure, what Sartre called “nausea” and Camus the “absurdity” of existence, they moved in antithetical directions. For Sartre, it led to a philosophy of radical freedom in which neither nature nor reason had any guiding role, which he then translated into a quasi-revolutionary politics with the help of categories borrowed from Marx. For Camus, it led to moderation, national solidarity, and the self-limitation of freedom as a condition of humanity. For the former, it equated existence with history, for the latter, it led back to nature as a counter-point to history, a modern version of classical humanism. The quarrel thus fleshed out the practical implications of Existentialism, its ethics and politics—what the philosophy of “existence” meant when actually “lived.” It brought out the latent violence in its theory of human relations, as it migrated into its natural habitat, the radicalism of the intellectuals. And it gave substance to Camus’ repeated denial that he was an “Existentialist,” in the strict and narrow sense virtually a synonym for Sartreanism.

Existentialism insists on seeing History as theater, invested with dramatic import. But actual history exposes the histrionic illusions of Existentialism. This is the real upshot of Aronson's book. What is really brought to light in replaying the collision of Sartre and Camus are the historicist delusions of Existentialism. Played out in literature and philosophy, the protagonists and their supporting cast plotted themselves and each other in their novels, plays, and memoirs. Post-War existential literature is profoundly shaped by rival dramatizations of Camus, Sartre, and de Beauvoir. All are featured as characters in each others' literary works. It is striking the extent to which their collisions obey the laws of quixotism. The tempting error to commit is to see the literary works as dramatizations of philosophical ideas—suggesting that the ideas originate separately, then inspire dramas and novels. More likely the reverse obtains. Existentialist politics reflect the theatrical demands of popular culture, a public world in which private individuals must prove their “authentic” freedom to an audience. It is life as literature, the guise of an abandonment of literature for life. Philosophy for it is already a drama in which the thinker imagines himself as the hero of a tragedy. Philosophy incarnates itself in a philosopher, an actor in a story, a revolutionary genius who has decoded the book of History in order to save the Proletariat. Existentialist politics sounds today like a novel of Cervantes.

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