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CHAPTER 15

Staging the Limit
Albert Camus's Just Assassins *and the Il/legitimacy of Terrorism*

Ève Morisi

What makes justice fair? And what can justify violence? Albert Camus's literary, journalistic, and philosophical production continually returns to these two questions, either together or on their own. His reflections on terrorism perpetrated by state and non-state actors, from his early underground publications during World War II through to his writings on terrorism and counterterrorism during the War of Independence in his homeland of Algeria, fit into this framework.[1] None of his works of fiction scrutinizes terrorism more closely than *Les Justes* (*The Just Assassins*), a play that premiered in Paris in 1949. Its plot takes place in Moscow in 1905 and recounts actual historical events. It features a group of "socialist revolutionaries" due to assassinate the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich – Nicholas II's autocratic uncle and the brother of Emperor Alexander II. The terrorists' attempt fails when one of them, Ivan Kaliayev (also known as Yanek in the play – and named after the actual member of the SR Combat Organization who killed the Grand Duke), refrains from throwing the bomb at the Grand Duke's carriage after seeing that his niece and nephew are also in it. This decision leads to a heated debate on the acceptability of the children's death within the group. A second, this time successful, attempt to kill the Grand Duke ensues. Kaliayev is arrested. While in jail, he confronts a number of dissenting voices, refuses to betray his "brothers" when given the opportunity to do so, and expresses the wish to die for the murder he has committed, before facing execution. His hanging leaves his peers desolate, especially his beloved Dora Doulebov. The play ends with the group of terrorists surrounding her as she asks to be given the next bomb and, in tears, wishes for a death similar to Kaliayev's. This chapter offers a close reading of *Les Justes* that takes into consideration Camus's theoretical thought on both the theater and the concepts of limit and revolt, and resituates the play within the context of

mid-twentieth-century European history. It argues that with *Les Justes*, Camus creates a fiction in and from which to think about the conditions of legitimacy of organized political and lethal violence in the late 1940s: He imagines a model form of terrorism, a terrorism of limits and at the limit, by resorting to a hybrid literary form that borrows from tragedy, melodrama, and dark comedy. Ultimately, this fictional terrorism, however exemplary, is shown to be unjustifiable, notably by this very literary hybrid.

Reinvesting Tragedy: The Reluctant Terrorist as Hero

At the heart of *Les Justes* lies the "just revolt" ("Prière d'insérer," 1949) of a group of men and women who believe they are working for the emancipation of Russia under a despotic regime (Stepan, Act II) marked by "misery and destitution" (Annenkov, Act V), repression, penal colonies, and what they deem to be the general enslavement of its people (Stepan, Act I; Annenkov, Act V).[2] As the protagonists embrace this fatal revolt, they go against both a political and a moral order: that of imperialism, and that of respect for human life. They violate the latter with both determination and moral quandaries. Through this framing, Camus turns the terrorists of 1905 into tragic heroes, at least initially.

In several respects, the form of *Les Justes* correspondingly harks back to French Classical tragedy, which Camus reworks to strategic ends; indeed, "Tragédie" is the very word he uses to describe the project that was to become *Les Justes* in his notebooks in 1945.[3] The play interestingly preserves a structure in five acts typical of the seventeenth century – France's golden age of the tragic genre embodied by Racine and Corneille – and abides by their principle of *bienséance*: The audience is spared the spectacle of death. The unities of time (a day), place (a single location), and action (one action with subplots directly connected to it) that this tragic model inspired by Aristotle demands are inflected but maintained at a figurative level.

The plot lasts for about ten days, considerably more than the twenty-four-hour span of action allocated to seventeenth-century French plays. Yet this extended time interval is unified by a cyclical logic and a process of revelation: The time of *Les Justes* is that which leads from life to death; the death of Ivan Kaliayev, first and foremost, but also that of the Grand Duke, and, implicitly, that of Dora. It is also a time that goes from revolutionary eagerness to the self-questioning that may accompany the act of killing (for Kaliayev, but also Voinov), to the redefinition of the conditions of its acceptability, and a certain desolation. A symbolic temporal unity,

centered on the vulnerability of human life and the development of the individual's conscience, thus emerges from the text.

Following the same controlled inflection of the codes of French Classical theater resulting in a symbolic intensification of the tragic, the locations of *Les Justes* point to a topography that is unified metaphorically: The two apartments and the prison cell of the play constitute enclosed spaces contiguous with but cut off from the world. In the spectator's eyes, only the noises heard from the stage (doorbell, bells) and the windows and doors of the apartments directly connect the protagonists to the outside. Such confinement finds itself duplicated by their ideological adhesion to the "cause" (Act II) to which they repeatedly refer and by their constituting a hermetic and tightly organized micro-society. The play thus heightens a symbolism of seclusion, entrapment, and inevitability.

As for the action of *Les Justes*, it is wholly directed toward an irresistible and overwhelming death. From the outset, the characters prepare to murder their intended target by evoking the making of the bomb and the act of killing (Dora, Act I). They also discuss their own passing, as Kaliayev and Dora highlight the congruence of killing and perishing (Act I). Yet Camus does not make the Grand Duke's assassination the only – or the true – climax of his dramatic arc, as opposed to what would be expected of the traditional, five-fold structure of tragedy (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, dénouement).[4] Instead, the center of the play, in Acts II and III (rising action and climax), features the interruption of murder – when Yanek confronts the perspective of killing children – that is to say the questioning of homicide, crystallized by the compulsive repetition of the negative "I couldn't do it."[5] The first high point of the action therefore corresponds to the moment when one has to decide, alone and then collectively, under what conditions blood must and can be shed. The play emphasizes not one but two transgressions: the restriction of killing as much as its subsequent perpetration.

Combined with the symbolic inflections of Classical tragedy noted earlier and the sense of solidarity, honor, and temerity that Camus ceaselessly highlights in the characterization of most of his protagonists, this decentered, and dual, heart of the play appears to further turn *Les Justes* into a tragedy about terrorists, rather than a tragedy about terrorism: The political and ethical journey represented, as well as the sympathy elicited by the protagonists as they seek to reconcile revolutionary action, doubt, and a certain condemnation of murder, highlight their moral respectability as the reluctant perpetrators of a clandestine political violence. The continuous if discreet self-referentiality of the play, in which the

protagonists recurrently refer to their having to dress up, invent fake identities for themselves, and act out to perpetrate their revolutionary enterprise, underscores their absence of predisposition for terrorist activism. In January 1948, Camus called the historical figures that were to inspire his characters "delicate murderers." The play portrays all of them but one as such – and Camus's initial hesitations for his title, between *Les Innocents* and *Les Coupables* (*The Guilty Ones*), strikingly encapsulates this oxymoronic, if not aporetic, heroism.

Camus's reinvestment of the tragic genre and his recentering it around heroic – reluctant and scrupulous – terrorists is furthered by the fact that the play's dialogues and dramatic tension largely put into practice his own definition of "tragedy." In a lecture from 1955 entitled "Sur l'avenir de la tragédie" ("On the Future of Tragedy"), he would argue that this genre depends on the co-presence of two forces that "are battling it out . . . both being equally legitimate, equally armed with reason."[6] *Les Justes* stages the collision of life and the love of life on the one hand (being alive, being able to love another human being, loving this love, freely experiencing the possibilities offered by human existence, alone and with others, letting others live) and, on the other, justice and the love of justice for the greatest number of people; that of the "people in chains" in particular, as Dora has it. Two competing legitimacies are born from the defense of these two value systems. To insist on their confrontation, Camus peppers the play with magnanimous maxims uttered by characters who tend to favor one or the other or, more dramatically, by the same character – most often Dora, as she reflects on the dilemma between the two. Her lines repeatedly emphasize a comparative, contrastive logic in juxtaposing the love of life and that of justice.

> *Lines containing maxims on the love of life or that of justice*:
> "Freedom is a prison for as long as a single man on earth is in chains" (Stepan, Act I)[7]
>
> "You need to be joyful, you need to be proud. Beauty exists, joy exists." (Kaliayev, Act I)[8]
>
> *Lines highlighting the tension between the love of life and that of justice:*
> "A true revolutionary cannot love himself." (Stepan, Act I)[9]
>
> "I do not love life, but justice, which is over and above life." (Stepan, Act I)[10]
>
> "Those who truly love justice are not entitled to love." (Dora, Act III)[11]

> "Do you love justice along with tenderness? (Kaliayev keeps quiet.) Do you love our people without restraint and with this gentleness?" (Dora, Act III)[12]

> "Do you love me more than justice, more than the Organization?" (Dora, Act III)[13]

> "I am waiting for you to call *me*, Dora, for you to call me over and above this world poisoned with injustice . . ." (Dora, Act III)[14]

> "One needs time to love. We barely have enough time for justice." (Dora, Act III)[15]

Such aphoristic rhetoric and imperative or evaluative grammar highlight with some rigidity the conflict between love and the love of justice among antagonistic heroes and the collision of these values within a single character's mind, sometimes to the point of paradox. But this sententious style does confer a certain grandeur on the protagonists and gives a muted lyrical intensity to the young couple at the heart of the play. In particular, Dora fulfills the tragic requirement *par excellence*: she brings together incompatible political and love interests typically found in Corneille, Racine, and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a line of which Camus cites in his epigraph. It specifically underlines, by way of a chiasmus and in aphoristic form, the impossibility for love – and the lover – to be found while alive: "O love! O life! Not life, but love in death" (Paris, Act IV, Scene 5). Contrary to Yanek, who is less experienced than her, Dora is aware from the beginning that an assassination, however necessary, can only be carried out with difficulty. She highlights the implacable logic following which the revolutionary cause is irreconcilable with individual happiness.[16]

"Sur l'avenir de la tragédie" notes that "true" modern tragedy "does not exist yet,"[17] all while insisting that, since Antiquity, the genre has grounded itself in the opposition between this very sense of individuality and a sacred that appears under the traits of "terror"[18] at critical moments in history. Camus associates individuality with one's "reflection" and "power to contest" ["pouvoir de contestation"][19] and defines these critical moments in history as times when the place of this sacred or terror is threatened by the place that society wishes to give to the individual, or vice versa. *Les Justes* offers a transposition of this rivalry between individuality and the sacred into the twentieth century. Here, the sacred has taken a new form: that of political ideology, of the revolutionary cause, and of the belief in the Progress of history, which Camus would analyze extensively a few years later, in the philosophical essay *L'Homme révolté*

(*The Rebel*, 1951).[20] The vocabulary of the just assassins is fraught with evangelical overtones and, as Jeanyves Guérin has argued, Stepan's logic is that of a millenarian sect, while Kaliayev's death is narrated as a secular "Passion."[21] And overall, the love that Dora and Yanek share and the refusal of most protagonists to condone the murder of the children both clash with this new sacred that is incarnated most rigidly – but not exclusively – by Stepan.

Convinced that the end justifies the means, Stepan affirms that the presence of the children alongside the Grand Duke should not have prevented the attack: They too could, should, have been killed. The aim of this new, ideological sacred is the abolition of suffering in Russia, and, more broadly, on earth (Annenkov: "hasten the liberation of the Russian people"; Dora: "Yanek accepts to kill the Grand Duke since his death can bring us nearer the time when Russian children will no longer die of starvation"; Stepan: "a land of freedom that will end up spreading over the whole world" and "the revolution . . . aims to cure all evils, present and yet to come"; Kaliayev: "Russia will be beautiful"). Its means is political murder targeting those practicing a despotic power exclusively–irrespective of collateral damage, for Stepan. From the bells that ring when Kaliayev abstains from killing the children (thus symbolically pointing to the sacredness of life above all things) to his crossing himself and his dying for what he believes is the salvation of future generations, signs of mysticism pervade *Les Justes*. The confirmation of the sacred of ideology is found in a univocal analogy formulated by Dora as Yanek's execution is impending. Appropriating a Christian sacrificial economy, she likens the terrorists to a collective Christ-like figure: "We have taken upon ourselves the whole world's misery. He too had taken it upon himself."

Generic Hybridity, Camus's Model Terrorists, and "Noon Thought"

Les Justes does not merely consist in a "reactualization" of Greek and early modern European tragedy designed to shed light on improbable terrorist heroes and their scrupulousness through the transposition of what Camus takes to be the tenet of this genre to a contemporary era and its new sacred, nevertheless. A number of critics have signaled that the two parties the play opposes over the murder of the children are not equally legitimate. They have argued that this prevents the whole from functioning as a tragedy and instead turns it into a melodrama.[22] This asymmetry calls for a closer examination.

As Eugène Kouchkine has remarked, Camus's notebooks indicate that, at the end of World War II, the author was looking for "legendary figures that could exemplify a possible purity in historical revolt."[23] He found these figures in the real Ivan Kaliayev, Dora Brilliant et al., whom he regarded as reflecting "great purity."[24] The reason why he dubbed them "delicate murderers" both in his 1948 article and in *L'Homme révolté* was that he believed they viewed the murder of their despot as both necessary and unacceptable; as an act that was to be paid for by the death of the killer, too – a reasoning Camus deemed respectable if erroneous. These murderers, Camus believed, were also worthy of respect in their refusal to kill children and "innocent" victims. While *Les Justes* follows historical facts very carefully, to some extent, it cosmeticizes elements of what Camus had read in preparing his play. It does so to highlight both exemplarity and the conditions of legitimacy of political violence in which the author believed.[25]

Camus invents the amorous relationship between Kaliayev and Dora, which intensifies their status as self-sacrificing figures. The real Boris Savinkov showed less humaneness than Annenkov, his *double* in the play: He wondered if "the death of the enemy is worth . . . a thought" in his *Memoirs of a Terrorist* (1917). For his part, the leader of the Organization, Evno Azev, was a traitor, a double agent of the secret Russian police, Okhrana. The play only alludes to this reality in passing. Conversely, Camus's fiction foregrounds the bright side of Savinkov's *Memoirs*: Dora Brilliant's portrayal as a deeply sensitive individual, faithful to the Revolutionary cause but averse to the sight of blood. The point here is not to decry this relative refashioning of history that valorizes all the characters inspired by historical figures, that is to say all the terrorists but Stepan – especially as Camus states in his author's note that his play is not of a historical nature even though it relates actual events and presents characters who "really existed." Rather, it is useful to reflect on the impact of this representation and more particularly the way in which it figures a model form of terrorism, which Camus opposes to an indefensible one.

Indeed, this euphemistic reworking goes hand in hand with scenes and signs that reveal a stark imbalance between the two supposedly competing legitimacies that make up *Les Justes* (the love of life *vs.* the love of justice). Such imbalance becomes patent in the stark contrast between Kaliayev and his somber foil Stepan Fedorov. From the outset, Kaliayev "the poet" embodies life and "measure" in the face of Fedorov, an incarnation of death and immoderation: Yanek's affable, cheerful, warm, and playful personality symmetrically counters Stepan's rigid, cold, withdrawn, and

suspicious presence and his focus on destruction ("Only bombs are revolutionary.")[26]

The disparity climaxes in Act Two, following Yanek's failure to throw the bomb against the Grand Duke's carriage after he realizes that the despot's niece and nephew are in it too. The scene seems to consolidate the risk of Manicheanism that pierces through Act I. Kaliayev is prostrate and lost on stage after the aborted attack. A chivalrous aura colors his dejection: His words testify to a spirit of fraternity,[27] a sense of honor,[28] a disinterestedness toward his own life, and the will to spare the weak – the children. The antagonism between the two conflicting positive poles (*amor vitae* /*amor justitiae*) that underlies the play here conspicuously morphs into an opposition between positive and negative value systems respectively incarnated by Yanek and Stepan.

Kaliayev defends the sparing of life, but also, with it, a humanistic logic anchored in the certainty of the present, where Stepan demands unqualified destruction and sinks into nihilism in the name of a better future that is not guaranteed. Two definitions of justice emerge here: Stepan's is one in which killing is expandable and violence could even be applied to the people if needed, whereas Kaliayev's justice is to be put to the service of life (that of the greatest possible number of people and of innocent figures) so that killing can only be perpetrated minimally, so to speak. That Dora and Annenkov support Kaliayev further highlights the inequality of the two opposing moral postures, adding a quantitative defeat to a qualitative one. With this framing, the core question posed by the scene, namely can one "assassinate children"[29] for a just cause, becomes a rhetorical one, sweeping aside the properly tragic opposition between *amor vitae* and *amor justitiae*.

Camus both aggravates and complicates this set-up. First, the ethical stance of Kaliayev and his supporters ("There is an order, there are limits, even when it comes to destruction")[30] does not only prevail as a sort of categorical imperative: It also imposes its soundness through a consequentialist reasoning that is less morally noble. To Stepan's argument that "Because Yanek did not kill these two [the Grand Duke's niece and nephew], thousands of Russian children will die of starvation for years to come,"[31] Dora responds: "The death of the Grand Duke's niece and nephew will not prevent any child from dying of starvation."[32] She also states that the Revolution may lose its influence on the people if it allows the killing of children.[33] Utilitarianism thus also disqualifies Stepan's position. Secondly, Camus furthers the moral rightfulness of Yanek and his supporters by making Stepan himself rally it. This occurs symbolically,

through Stepan's body language – which the dialogue highlights – when Kaliayev refers to the children. Ivan notes that they did not smile while in the carriage, and seemed "sad," "stiff," "lost in their Sunday best." In other words, they are portrayed as dehumanized, already half dead, and Kaliayev cannot bring himself to take their lives away for good in the face of this vulnerability. As Maurice Blanchot puts it, "this childlike weakness, this extreme defenselessness" is that "in front of which death recoils, because death cannot reach it, because this weakness is this stopping, this very recoiling."[34] Blanchot adds that language may emerge in such a context. If Kaliayev – the man of words, the "poet" – confirms this, so does Stepan. Temporarily abandoning the deadly language of "l'Organisation," he closes his eyes when Dora asks him if he could shoot a child with his eyes open. This facial expression is all the more significant when one knows that Camus viewed theater as an art that tells stories through bodies.[35]

In these respects, Act II is more akin to a drama than to a tragedy, following Camus's own assertion that, in drama, "Only one individual is just and can be legitimized" ["Un seul est juste et justifiable"].[36] But long before literary critics reproached him for this shift in genres, he himself felt the need to specify that, while his characters were "equals in both strength and reason" – after all, Stepan does draw his thirst for destruction from the time he spent in a penal colony, various humiliating experiences, and the witnessing of the regime's violence – "it would be inaccurate to conclude that everything evens itself out." Camus added that he meant to "show that action itself had limits."[37]

This will to "show," to demonstrate, even, is to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the generic shift toward drama that occurs in the play – until Act IV, to be exact. Camus's fiction serves a political purpose in fashioning model terrorists in a modernized-tragedy-turned-drama. Practicing "terror" without ever "ceasing to be torn apart by it,"[38] they incarnate what *L'Homme révolté*, focused on the question of murder, would call "La Pensée de midi" ("Noon Thought"). "Noon Thought" is the claim, or rather the image, according to which a "pure tension" "between the measure and the absence of measure . . . drives the history of the West . . .."[39] This tension brings out the need to set limits to the practice of violence.[40] Camus uses the symbol of the sun at noon, and the concepts of limits and measure with which he associates it, to define the fine line on which authentic revolt rests, in opposition to revolutionary absolutism. Not that he advocates for a pacifist stance; far from it. Rather, after World War II, the author – a former member of the French Résistance, which had

to resort to lethal violence and was called "terrorist" by its opponents – firmly reminds his peers that violence is sometimes necessary, but that it is "both inevitable and unjustifiable" if it fails to be exceptional: It must be "br[ought] within strict limits" ["resserr[ée] dans les limites qu'on peut"], as Camus puts it in a reply to Communist supporter Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie in 1948.[41] Likewise, Revolt is desirable, he argues, insofar as it generates action – sometimes violent action – that brings about changes in favor of social and political justice *all the while* rejecting the total or totalitarian reign of ideology, synonymous with the supremacy of absolute abstraction and the discarding of life as the ultimate good. Camus decries such supremacy not just in the criticism of Communism found in *L'Homme révolté* or the previously cited reply to De la Vigerie, but also, before that, in such articles as "Mystified Socialism" in *Ni Victimes ni bourreaux* (*Neither Victims nor Executioners*, 1946): "terror can only be legitimized if one accepts the principle: 'the end justifies the means.'"[42] This reflection is taken up, and brought to a resounding conclusion, in *L'Homme révolté*: "The end justifies the means? That is possible. But who will justify the end? To this question, which historical thought leaves unanswered, revolt answers: the means."[43] One of the key implied targets here is Stalinism, with its collectivization, single party, Great Purge, forced labor camps, and, after the war, its continued mass deportations and executions, show trials, and targeted assassinations. Camus's writing also expressed a disagreement with those Western intellectuals who refused to condemn this regime and ideology unequivocally, especially as the Soviet model was gaining ground throughout Eastern Europe after the war and as Stalinism entered its particularly harsh final phases.

State-sponsored terror and deadly violence legitimized in the name of uncertain future social progress therefore constituted Camus's nemesis in these post-war years. This explains the generic hybridization of the first half of *Les Justes* into a melodrama designed to propose model figures that incarnate what he would soon term "Noon Thought," a phrase and image meant to condemn lethal political violence beyond strict limits preserving the greatest possible number of lives. In this respect, Camus's play can be read with other anti-totalitarian European works of the decade addressing State terrorism in its various guises, Stalinist, but also Nazi; *L'Homme révolté* takes the critical step of condemning them jointly. Among these works are *Darkness at Noon* (English trans. 1941), *Arrival and Departure* (1943), and *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1945) by Arthur Koestler – whom Camus supported and with whom he later collaborated – David Rousset's essay *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (*The Other Kingdom*, 1946) and *Les Jours*

de notre mort (*The Days of Our Death*, 1947), Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (*If this is a man*, 1947), Victor Serge's collection of articles republished as *Le Nouvel Impérialisme russe* (*The New Russian Imperialism*, 1947), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

In France, a number of contemporary publications and figures also directly addressed the theme of *Les Justes*, namely "progressive violence," through a lens that differed from that foregrounded in Camus's fiction, encapsulated in Kaliayev's words to Stepan: "behind what you are saying, I see a despotism looming which, if it ever takes root, will make an assassin of me whereas I am trying to be a righter of wrongs" (Act II). Chief among these contemporary publications was Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Les Mains Sales* (1948), of course, and the pro-Communist writings of those who were close to him at the time: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose thesis in *Humanisme et Terreur* (1947) had repulsed Camus, or Francis Jeanson, who, after being critical of Camus's works in the 1940s, was to publish in 1952 in *Les Temps Modernes* the well-known acerbic review of *L'Homme révolté* that precipitated Camus and Sartre's divorce ("Albert Camus ou l'âme révoltée").

As the genesis and contents of *Les Mains sales* and *Les Justes* reveal, and as a number of critics have already shown, these two plays are in close dialogue.[44] A few years before he became a fellow traveler of the Communist party, Sartre rejected Stalinism (*Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, 1947), supported the alternative of the "Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire" (founded by Rousset, among others) in 1948, and was criticized for writing a play that some deemed to display a "militant anti-communism."[45] Yet *Les Mains Sales* blatantly contrasts with *Les Justes*, in terms of both form and content: Through Hoederer's words, it explodes the posture of the noble intellectual reluctant to shed blood as opposed to the realist activist willing to "get his hands dirty." Worse yet: It disqualifies the Russian terrorists of 1905. The disagreement between Camus and Sartre lay in defining conditions of legitimacy for a practice of lethal violence. In the 1950s, the gap between the two would become increasingly unbridgeable with the Algerian War of Independence and Sartre's support for the terrorism of the National Liberation Front – famously praised in the preface to Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* (published in 1961, a year after Camus's accidental death). In this later Algerian context, Sartre's stance was diametrically opposed to Camus's tireless attempts to curtail what he named "the bloody nuptials of terrorism and repression."[46] The terrorists of 1905 whom Camus reinvents to some extent "do not place any idea over and above human life, although they kill for the sake of

ideas."[47] They thereby vigorously invalidate the progressive violence promoted by some of his peers. *L'Homme révolté* would mark the climax of this condemnation, with Camus comparing his model terrorists with his contemporaries: "Two races of men. One man kills only once and pays for it with his life. The other justifies thousands of crimes and agrees to receive honors for it."[48]

One may find it surprising that Camus, who doesn't support *la littérature engagée* in a Sartrean, militant sense, should shape *Les Justes* into a hybrid genre, an edifying melo-tragedy so to speak, in order to express univocally the exemplarity of protagonists turned into model terrorists. There is in fact more to the play than that. First, as Maurice Weyembergh has argued, the exemplary dimension of *Les Justes* should be linked to a commemorative function: It celebrates a "founding moment of revolt."[49] As I have suggested, this founding moment is reinvented, and commemoration thus transits through a fictionalization of 1905 terrorism used to counter the proponents of the theory of the end justifying the means. Secondly, as we shall now see, the very model terrorists that Camus creates find themselves critiqued by the progression and the fourth act of the play.

The Impossible Justice of *Les Justes*

Even though Camus crafts the fiction of model terrorists, whom he believes to be respectable in that they kill *a minima* to put an end to political oppression and are loath to murder, his fiction expresses reservations. *Les Innocents* are also *Les Coupables* (*The Guilty Ones*): The play's antithetical preliminary titles bear witness to the ironic potential of the title Camus ended up adopting, *Les Justes*. After all, the "justice" obtained by the protagonists is homicidal. The title's antiphrastic ring subtly coexists with the admiration that the author and his play manifest for the protagonists – with the title's non-ironic sense, in other words.

Indeed, *Les Justes* also features a distancing vis-à-vis the ideology and actions of the revolutionaries, especially those of Kaliayev, despite his heroization. Dora crystallizes some of this distancing. In Act I, she fears that Ivan is not aware of the horror that murder may elicit when the time to perpetrate it comes. Symmetrically, at the end of the play, she metamorphoses into a murderer who ardently wishes to throw the next bomb. As she expresses this desire to imitate her beloved and to join him in death (at the end of the same "noose"), she also comes to imitate the nihilistic Stepan. The mimesis of love is thus equally that of murder, which, in turn,

marks the failure of a terrorism contained within strict limits – the terrorism of "noon thought." Albeit in passing, Yanek himself symbolically heralds this failure, or, at least, this problematization of a supposedly restricted terrorism: At the end of Act II, he declares that, if necessary, he will also kill the Grand Duchess, a figure who may not be as obviously innocent as the children, but who does reveal the difficulty there is in circumscribing and defining an acceptable or "guilty" political target. Even more dramatically, in Act V, Dora magnifies the question of the potential failure of discriminate political violence by reflecting on her peers. "You have gone too fast. You are no longer men," she deplores, before suggesting that the ethics of the delicate murderers might be used by other, less scrupulous revolutionaries prone to maximalist killing in the future: "Others may come who will use us to justify their killing and will not pay with their lives."[50]

Several secondary characters to whom critics have paid little attention play a crucial role in furthering this critique of a legitimate terrorism. Alexis Voinov is one of them. Scared at the thought of having to "start all over again" at the end of Act II, he faces Stepan's "contempt."[51] Voinov's doubts increase in Act III. They result from both the desire to remain alive (to "smell soup," to be in the presence of a wife and children, to feel the motion of a crowd of human beings) and the fear of murder, of the "moment when [he] will throw . . . two lives into the fire."[52] Eventually, Alexis tells Annenkov that he wishes to abandon the terrorist stage and to serve the Organization blindly, so to speak, from within its committees. The meeting ends with a powerful symbolic moment: Voinov literally runs to the backstage of the theater and thus figuratively goes behind the scenes of the organization. Distancing, here, is both physical and moral, even if the character briefly returns in Act V.

More brutal is the critique leveled by Foka's character. Foka is the only incarnation of the people in the play. Up to Act IV, this entity remains both central (in the protagonist's speeches) and absent, abstract: It constitutes a theoretical nebula that motivates the protagonists' revolutionary activism and grants it legitimacy. Foka's appearance on stage punctures this legitimacy. He suggests that the terrorists had constructed for themselves a highly romanticized, and erroneous, image of the masses.

A first exchange between Foka and Kaliayev testifies to a culture shock and a dialogue of the deaf through an efficient play of symmetries. Each character utters a four-syllable sentence, one affirmative and the other negative, regarding the reason Foka committed murder – a crime of

which Yanek is also guilty. The lexical and syntactic parallelism of the two lines only make the characters' opposition stand out more:

KALIAYEV: You were hungry? [Tu avais faim?]
FOKA: No, I was thirsty. [Non, j'avais soif.][53]

Dark humor pervades the dialogue that ensues. Camus weaves together bitter irony, lines indicative of diverging modes of thinking and value systems, and scathing tragi-comical overtones. "Well then, boyar, you no longer call me brother? You're less keen now?"[54] quips Foka after telling Yanek about his various crimes. The man of the people then undoes further the archetypal image of a morally noble folk, which his very name echoes. When Kaliayev, who is convinced of his interlocutor's goodness *a priori*, asks Foka if he regrets killing three men, the reply is a false positive. Thoroughly ignoring ethical considerations, it foregrounds individualism and pragmatism:

KALIAYEV: . . . answer me, you regret what has happened, don't you?
FOKA: Sure, twenty years, that's a high price. It makes you have regrets.[55]

Soon, Foka declares that "shame" is foreign to him. The moral and social gap that separates the characters widens. First, the representative of the people proves incredulous when hearing about Yanek's assassination of the Grand Duke for the sake of social justice. He even postulates candidly that the motivations of the "good-looking" Yanek must have been personal rather than high-minded (a love affair "at the court"), and fails to understand the need for his interlocutor to be a socialist revolutionary: "Now that's quite a story. And why did you need to be like that [i.e. a socialist revolutionary]?"[56]

The interaction between the two characters is a crescendo in incommunicability that comes to affect the political realm: Foka turns out to advocate for a resolute conservatism. Justice, he argues, is not to be sought in this world but in "the Kingdom of God."[57] More problematically even, he is complicit with the methods of tsarist power, having agreed to a pact that reduces his prison sentence by a year every time he hangs a man. "It's a good deal," he notes, adding that what is ordered cannot be a crime. The scene's dark comicality further hybridizes the genre of *Les Justes*, especially as it is rendered pathetic by the benevolence that each character shows toward the other. Their moral and political disconnect culminates with Foka's inability to understand a parable Yanek narrates about god's possible absence and the saintliness of those who help their fellow men on

earth. The figurative, and elevated, meaning of the parable Yanek attempts to convey *and* that of his own activism, cannot be reconciled with the literal, pragmatic, and traditionalist view of existence and politics adopted by Foka. This incompatibility is encapsulated in a final and ruinous disagreement between the two men concerning two moral categories dear to Camus: those of "victim" and "executioner." The following lapidary exchange seals the encounter:

KALIAYEV: So you are an executioner, then?
FOKA, *by the door*: Well then, boyar, how about you?[58]

The relativity, if not the reversibility, of these two moral – and legal – categories is picked up and reinforced cumulatively as both the chief of police, Skouratov, and the Grand Duchess subsequently speak with Kaliayev. Through their voices, Camus completes the mutation of Act IV into an examination of the possible injustice of "les justes." Skouratov uses the term "assassination" to qualify Yanek's act. Forgetting that he himself had used such a word in Act I, Ivan vigorously rejects it, arguing that he has "thrown the bomb" at "a tyranny," and not at a man, that a "verdict" has been "executed" as opposed to an individual, and that, lastly, he has used an idea and not a bomb to strike at the Grand Duke.[59] Yet similarly to Foka, albeit in a more frontal and skillful fashion, Skouratov, whom Camus portrays as a contemptible Machiavellian but also as a logician, invalidates Kaliayev's metaphor- and symbol-ridden thought. Consequently, the terrorist who, up until then, was nicknamed "the poet" reaches a threshold beyond which beyond which figurative language can no longer operate. It becomes denounced as the mask of murder. This adversarial exchange confirms the dual status of the revolutionary as both a man of justice and a criminal man; indeed, it tends to underscore the latter.

With the Grand Duchess, the play accentuates the destabilization of the victim/executioner taxonomy by means of comparison and symbolism. She claims that a vocal and moral resemblance conjoins the Grand Duke and Kaliayev. The distinction between the former, previously presented as a cruel and perverse tyrant,[60] and the latter, largely portrayed as a heroic knight with scrupulous ethics in the first acts of the play, thus collapses temporarily.

THE GRAND DUCHESS: The same voice! You had the same voice as him. All men take the same tone to talk about justice. He used to say: "That is just!" and everyone had to be quiet. He was wrong maybe, you are wrong . . .[61]

The terrorists' acting game (dressing-up, the necessary use of fake identities, etc.) that is thematized throughout the play takes a new turn here, or perhaps even comes to a halt, through the relative sameness of the revolutionary activist and the oppressive sovereign. Symbolically, the possible criminality of "les justes" surfaces: The Grand Duchess portrays her husband as laying claim to justice in a peremptory and potentially erroneous way – just like Yanek.[62] Two textual elements take this idea further, fleshing out the permutation of innocence and guilt. The widow represents the Grand Duke as a vulnerable man, who was asleep[63] when he was murdered; a man at once harmless and killed with treachery and savagery (she insists on the dismemberment of his body and his bleeding). Additionally, she reclaims the assessment of what is and is not just by uttering the qualifier "injuste" (unjust) three times in a single sentence. She uses the adjective to refute Yanek's view of her nephew and niece as innocent figures by noting that they are in fact heartless whereas her husband empathized with the poor. "You too are unjust," she concludes, confiscating the legitimacy of the terrorist hero with a solemnity and pathos that was absent from the words of Skouratov. Together, Voinov, Foka, Skouratov, the Duchess, but also Dora, overturn the seeming political didacticism of *Les Justes* and underscore the utopian character of a supposedly desirable and fully mastered murder.

Les Justes oscillates between, on the one hand, a revisited tragedy, in which society's new sacred object is that of revolutionary ideology and in which the ultimate transgression is the refusal, as much as the perpetration, of murder, and, on the other, a drama that turns the thoughts and action of the most reluctant terrorists of 1905 Russia into *exempla* yet finds itself sporadically undercut by dark humor. This generic hybridity and the play's partial refashioning of reality result in a fictional template for acceptable political lethal violence. The model terrorists Camus creates embody what he would later name "Noon Thought" – another fiction. They allow for the implicit critique of the State- and party-based "progressive" terrorism that some of Camus's contemporaries defended or refused to condemn unequivocally in the late 1940s. Yet *Les Justes* does not merely seek to edify the spectator and commemorate some "true Revolt" through these figures. Heroic and respectable as it may be, their reluctant and "measured" terrorism rests on a fragile legitimacy disavowed by the people and its collateral victims, and finds itself problematized by the final specter of mimetic violence. Even within the carefully-crafted space of acceptability for revolutionary terrorism whose boundaries and nobility the play maximizes, Camus's writing

points to the danger that hovers over a discriminating terror designed to emancipate. It subtly poses the question of its potential degeneration into a violence that is as blind as love and can forget that institutionalized murder is its initial target and counter-model.

Notes

1. For a collection of these varied writings on terrorism from above and from below in Camus's works, see Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, ed., *Réflexions sur le terrorisme* (Paris: Nicolas Philippe, 2002), which includes two relevant closing essays by Denis Salas and Antoine Garapon. See Jean Monneret, *Camus et le terrorisme* (Paris: Michalon, 2013) as well. A synthesis of Camus's view and experience of terrorism is also provided in the first ten pages of Guy Dugas, "Camus, Sénac, Roblès: les écrivains de l'École d'Alger face au terrorisme," in *Albert Camus in the 21st Century: A Reassessment of His Thinking at the Dawn of the New Millennium*, ed. Christine Margerrison, Mark Orme and Lissa Lincoln (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 189–205. The same volume comprises an insightful chapter by John Foley, "Albert Camus and Political Violence," pp. 207–222. About the applicability of Camus's thought to today's terrorism, see Maurice Weyembergh, "L'Analyse camusienne du terrorisme est-elle encore actuelle?" in *Albert Camus 22. Camus et l'Histoire*, ed. Raymond Gay-Crosier and Philippe Vanney (Caen, Lettres Modernes Minard, 2009), pp. 135–147. Regarding the particular question of Algeria, see, for instance, Jean Daniel, "Albert Camus, Germaine Tillion et le terrorisme," in *Albert Camus, l'exigence morale. Hommage à Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi*, ed. Agnès Spiquel and Alain Schaffner (Paris: Éditions le Manuscrit, 2006), pp. 19–32 and the fifth chapter and the conclusion of David Carroll's groundbreaking monograph *Albert Camus the Algerian. Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 107–130, 179–186.
2. *OC III*, pp. 57, 48. All references to Camus's works are taken from Œuvres complètes, ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi et al., 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2006–2008), abbreviated as *OC I, II, III* and *IV*. Translations are my own. I thank Jim House for commenting on them and for his generous proofreading.
3. *OC II*, p. 1041.
4. This structure is prescribed by Horace's *Ars Poetica*, practiced by the Early Moderns (from Shakespeare to Racine), and popularized by Gustav Freytag's *Die Technik des Dramas* in the nineteenth century.
5. *OC III*, pp. 18, 19.
6. *OC III*, p. 1115.
7. Ibid., p. 6.
8. Ibid., p. 10.
9. Ibid., p. 11.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 29.

12. Ibid., p. 30.
13. Ibid., p. 30.
14. Ibid., p. 31.
15. Ibid., p. 32.
16. On the conflict of justice and love or individual happiness, see for instance Geraldine F. Montgomery, "L'amour ou la justice? Voix de la révolte dans *L'État de siège* et *Les Justes*," in *La Passion du théâtre. Camus à la scène*, ed. Sophie Bastien, Geraldine F. Montgomery and Mark Orme (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 67–79.
17. *OC III*, p. 1120.
18. Ibid., pp. 1112, 1113.
19. Ibid., p. 1118.
20. On the sacred as taking on a new, revolutionary form, see for instance Camus's use of Michelet to present the French Revolution as "the confrontation between grace and justice," or his view of Marxism as "the last representative of the struggle between justice and grace" in *L'Homme révolté, OC III*, p. 156, 254–255.
21. Jeanyves Guérin, "Pour une lecture politique des *Justes* de Camus," in *Mesures et démesure dans les lettres françaises au XXe siècle*, ed. Jean-Pierre Goldenstein and Michel Bernard (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007), pp. 97–110 (pp. 106, 103).
22. See for instance Edward Freeman, "Camus's *Les Justes*. Modern Tragedy or Old-Fashioned Melodrama?" *Modern Language Quarterly* 31 (1970), pp. 78–91 and " Albert Camus: *Les Justes*," in *Theatres of War: French Committed Theatre from the Second World War to the Cold War* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1998), pp. 103–116; Maurice Weyembergh, "Théâtre et politique chez Albert Camus," in *Albert Camus et le theatre*, ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi (Paris: IMEC, 1992), pp. 45–56; Jeanyves Guérin, "Le tragique, la tragédie et l'histoire chez Camus," in *Albert Camus et le theatre*, ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi (Paris: IMEC, 1992), pp. 159–170; Christine Margerrison, "Camus and the Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. Edward J. Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 67–78.
23. Eugène Kouchkine, "*Les Justes*: le tragique de l'amour et du renoncement," in *Camus et le lyrisme*, ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi and Agnès Spiquel (Paris: Sedes, 1997), pp. 161–172 (p. 163).
24. *Carnets, Cahier V* (1947), *OC II*, p. 1083.
25. Regarding the works that Camus read as he researched these Russian Revolutionary figures, see Roger Quilliot's notes in Albert Camus, *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, ed. Roger Quilliot (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), pp. 1814, 1816, 1838. On the conditions of legitimacy of political violence defined by Camus, see John Foley's incisive overview in "Albert Camus and Political Violence," pp. 213–214.
26. Act I, *OC III*, p. 7.
27. "KALIAYEV, *stunned*: Brothers, forgive me, I just couldn't." *OC III*, p. 18.

28. "ANNENKOV: Yanek, you got scared ? / KALIAYEV: Scared, no, you don't have the right [to say that]." *OC III*, p. 18.
29. *OC III*, p. 20.
30. Ibid., p. 22.
31. Ibid., p. 21.
32. Ibid., p. 22.
33. "Open your eyes and understand that the Organization would lose its power and influence if it tolerated for one sole moment that children be ripped apart by our bombs."
34. Maurice Blanchot, "Tu peux tuer cet Homme," *Nouvelle Revue Française* 18 (June, 1954), pp. 1059–1069 (pp. 1068–1069).
35. *OC III*, p. 20.
36. "Sur l'avenir de la tragédie," Ibid., p. 1115.
37. "Ajout au prière d'insérer pour la Comédie de l'Est," *OC III*, p. 58.
38. "Les Meurtriers délicats," "Le Terrorisme individuel," "III. La Révolte historique," *L'Homme révolté, OC III*, p. 204.
39. "La Pensée de midi," "Mesure et démesure," "V. La Pensée de midi," *L'Homme révolté, OC III*, p. 317.
40. "Measure . . . teaches us that any morality needs a dose of realism: the purest virtue is murderous; and that any realism needs a dose of morality: cynicism is murderous." "Conversely, measure is pure tension." *L'Homme révolté, OC III*, pp. 315, 319.
41. "Réponse à Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie," *OC II*, p. 457.
42. *OC II*, p. 441.
43. *OC III*, p. 312.
44. For a thorough article synthesizing the Camus–Sartre relation, see Sandra Teroni, "Camus/Sartre," *Revue Italienne d'Études Françaises* [online], 3 (2013), http://rief.revues.org/256. For book-length studies, see Eric Werner, *De la violence au totalitarisme: essai sur la pensée de Camus et de Sartre* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1972); Germaine Brée, *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1972); Ahmed Bakcan, *Camus et Sartre: deux intellectuels en politique* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2000); Ronald Aronson, *Camus & Sartre: the Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004). For a comparison of Sartre's and Camus's plays, see for instance Debra Popkin, "Voice of Innocence and Experience in Sartre's *Dirty Hands* and Camus' The Just Assassins," *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 17:3–4 (1996), pp. 285–291; Brigitta Coenen-Mennemeirer, "Das Theater als moralische Anstalt. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mains sales* (1948) und Albert Camus, *Les Justes* (1949)," in Konrad Schoell, ed., *Französische Literatur. 20. Jahrhundert. Theater* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2006), pp. 151–200; Aurélie Van der Wiele, "Peut-on être justes en ayant les mains sales? De l'entente à la rupture entre Sartre et Camus," *French Review* 83:9 (2016), pp. 150–160.
45. Pol Gaillard, "C'est Sartre qui a les mains sales," *Les Lettres françaises* 203 (April 8, 1948).

46. "Le Parti de la trêve," *L'Express* (January 17, 1956), reproduced in *Actuelles III. Chroniques algériennes 1939–1958, OC IV*, p. 371.
47. *OC III*, pp. 206, 342.
48. Ibid., p. 209.
49. Weyembergh, "Théâtre et politique chez Albert Camus," pp. 46, 55.
50. *OC III*, p. 48.
51. Ibid., p. 24.
52. Ibid., p. 27.
53. Act IV, *OC III*, p. 34.
54. *OC III*, p. 34.
55. Ibid., p. 34.
56. Ibid., pp. 34–35.
57. Ibid., p. 35.
58. Ibid., p. 36.
59. Ibid., p. 38.
60. "There is something that is even more abject than being a criminal, it is to force someone who is not made for crime to commit one." *OC III*, p. 42.
61. *OC III*, p. 41.
62. "THE GRAND DUCHESS: Who better to talk to about the crime, but the murderer ? / KALIAYEV: What crime? I only remember an act of justice." *OC III*, pp. 40–41.
63. *OC III*, p. 41.