

Farewells To Justice, God, Politics And The European Way

Heinrich Boll,
Women In A River Landscape,
translated from the German by David McLintock,
London: Secker & Warburg, 1988.
(Originally published in 1985.)

Albert Camus,
The Fall,
translated by Justin O'Brien,
N.Y.: Modern Library, 1958.
(Originally published in 1956.)

Friedrich Durrenmatt,
The Execution Of Justice,
translated from the German by John E. Woods,
N.Y: Random House, 1989.
(Originally published in 1985.)

Graham Greene,
Dr. Fischer Of Geneva Or The Bomb Party,
London: Penguin Books, 1980.

[David Cook](#)

Four career ending works for the end of the post-Nietzschean festival. Four clearing- house works for the new Europe bringing to culmination centuries of reflection over four grand signifiers; morals, justice, politics and the European way. Four "pleasant" reads. Each work is cast in the style of Camus' *The Fall* with its metaphysic of reversals of guilt and innocence in the self-laceration of the judge-penitent. Each work presents "superior" judgments tinged with a moralism of those who "fornicated and read the papers"; a moralism that constantly moves out of sight in the spaces of old Europe -- whether this be Amsterdam in the case of Camus or Switzerland for Greene and Durrenmatt or Boll's Bonn. Works that are at once "more real than real" in order to become "more just than just" in the melancholic blend of "cynical reason/wisdom" and of "experience" of the "superior" suicides that litter each of the landscapes. Suicides and murders that constitute the sacrificial ground of old Europe's culture: the price demanded each time the old values appear when the landscape must be cleared leaving corpses as the sign of the transvaluation of values of the late twentieth century "supermen". Four novels then, that are after-images of worlds that have imploded, where the grand signifiers shine brightest before their relegation to the depths of resentment of the museum culture of old Europe.

Each work is also in the tradition of the Marquis de Sade: this time not on the sexual axis, for sex has disappeared into rape and boredom, but in the "discharge of justice" of the inverted "heroes" of each novel. The exchanges, no longer fluid but withered, that at the limit eviscerate the subject who disintegrates under the stress of morals and values constituting the debris of old Europe at the vanishing point.

Greene's novel, similar to the other three works, revolves around the suicide of the wealthy and powerful Dr. Fischer, a "toothpaste millionaire", to quote the promo at the end of the book, who through a succession of dinner parties "plays" the "host" with his guests, the "parasites", offering "prizes" to those who fulfill his wishes. At the "final party" each guest is asked to choose a party cracker one of which purportedly is a bomb. There isn't a bomb, the wasteland ends after all with a whimper not a bang, through a dramatic play with Fischer's

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son-in-law Jones who, from time to time, is called Smith to keep the reader abreast of his "everyman" qualities. Jones, an employee of the local chocolate factory, represents, as well, what is left of dialectical opposites and true love which is ended appropriately enough in the demise of Fischer's daughter on the Swiss ski hills. Fischer, as is only fitting in these reversed Christian myths, at the end of the party takes his own life and Jones returns to everyday life.

The metaphysical allusions and the parable aspect of Greene's faith are, of course, quite evident in the novel. Fischer is a reversed Christ figure giving away his money on the basis of hate rather than love. This is an updated version of Nietzsche's genealogy of morals; a form of human experimentation, a mutant science of morals, that results in a hardly surprising failed transvaluation of the morals and greed of Swiss high society. The novel ends very much like Camus' *The Plague*, with things back to normal, the party being over for the day. Greene undoubtedly viewed this as a call to moral revival but the novel stands much easier as a demonstration of morals as the game of the wealthy which like the television docudrama, creates temporary extermination spaces to play out a drama. Once the "event" happens it disappears immediately; morals or God if you will only as post mortems for those interested in the debris after the crash: old Europe's leftovers providing the carrion for the next cultural suicide. Durrenmatt's *The Execution of Justice*, as with many of Durrenmatt's earlier works, expels justice to the realm outside the "cave" where the "just judges", to use a phrase from Camus, finally preside. Again the theme of the necessary expulsion of each site, its destruction as a space in the same way as in *The Visit*, in which the old woman destroys the town. Here the call to justice exterminates not only the inhabitants but goes beyond to the extermination of events and values themselves.

The novel's plot turns on the reversal of the judgment of guilt of Dr. H. C. Kohler who had shot and killed Professor Winter in a restaurant. The murder was "witnessed" by the Chief of police amongst other diners. Kohler, of course a wealthy Swiss, hires lawyer Spat, who is best known as counsel for the local whores, to investigate the possibility that he, Kohler, did not commit the murder in question. The story then plays out this possibility which ends in the acquittal of Kohler, several murder/suicides of other characters and the final "murder" of Kohler by Spat, hence the work's title. Typical Durrenmatt fare of "dangerous turns" mixed in with the culinary delights of Winter's "last supper".

Durrenmatt's metaphysic is similar to Greene's, usually with God being replaced by justice in the role more of the Old Testament vengeful settling of accounts, with love having resumed its career with the local whores. Again like Durrenmatt's earlier work such as *The Visit* the lack of a political community forces the question of justice to the world of power and influence from which the progression of suicides and murders proceed. In *The Execution of Justice* it is events themselves that disappear, are exterminated, as the "consensus" of the community is reformulated on the basis of any possibility being as real as any other. Kohler's "innocence" becomes more real than the reality of his guilt. Thus Durrenmatt's justice, forced to be more just than just, becomes the return of the murdering principle entering the drama as an operator to transform the action -- a self-denying encirclement into violence and terrorism.

Heinrich Boll's last effort before his death in 1985 does to politics what Durrenmatt and Greene did for justice and morals. Here the scene is Bonn and the list of characters are post-war politicians and their wives and lovers. One probably should add as well the Rhine river as a metaphysical character with the perfunctory allusions to Wagner, and grand pianos -- preferably owned by bankers -- which are periodically smashed up in the novel, contributing to the symbolism of culture and its link to money and violence -- though not without a touch of Boll's humour.

The novel is in dialogue or soliloquy form and turns on the escalating loss of sense, direction and meaning in the politics of manipulation. This is captured aptly by Boll in the opening quotation from a Goethe poem "Wanderer's Peace of Mind" which concludes that "baseness ever crowds the scene". Events are driven by party in-fighting, usually represented by the character Sponge, and reflected in the gradual disintegration of the lives, which are always public even at their personal moment of suicide, of the politicians and their wives and lovers. Here the Nietzschean will-not-to-will is played out. Both the old socialist Grobsch, who writes speeches for the Christian right, and Wubler, the party hack whose "instrumental reason" replaces the will of political actors with prepared speeches and media events, are bled in Sadean fashion. Boll leaves Grobsch to continue feeding on the alterity of his contradictions. Wubler having become dissipated, without content, is left to a modern demise. Without the energy left to propel the media machine, the channel stops broadcasting, the frequency is shifted, and Wubler disappears into the twilight of a career that is infinitely unrewarding and forgettable.

As with the other works, the metaphysical weighs on the plot. This is caught appropriately at

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the end of the novel by the banker Krengel's comment that his existence was "leaden", but not as a grounding of ontology nor as iron in the soul, but rather as the baseness that takes all the characters to the "depths" of the Nietzschean post-Wagner concert. Hence, a number of the characters exit by way of walking in the Rhine, usually the women who having "overheard" the machinations of their male cohabitants crack, or are broken under the injunction that they must deny what they know, or by more conventional methods of heart attack, suicide or resignation, such as Count von Kreyel, who rejects the trip to the Rhine because it would offer yet another occasion that could be put to cynical use by his former colleagues.

As a "fictitious description" of post-war Germany, Boll combines nastiness with resignation, intertwining of the historical past, always recreated as the need arises, as it worms its way into the public light at times to discredit, at other times to sap the will of the individuals with an overall sense of the exhaustion of the present where nothing has or will change. Throughout the book women appear in the role of truth-sayers articulating what was heard or over-heard. Throughout the book they are silenced by incarceration or suicide. Hence Boll's landscape of the depopulated, abandoned Sadean castle's ruins along the Rhine.

The paradigm novel of the four is Camus' *The Fall*. Coming as it does at the cross-over point of his argument with Sartre, it bifurcates French thinking; political commitment to Sartre and post political ethic to Camus. Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the character of *The Fall*, exists in the Weberian disenchanted world having exhausted the vocation of commitment as lawyer/activist and, by implication of his Christian name, the Christian myth, by replaying the alterity inside of judgement. Simultaneously innocent and guilty, judge and penitent, he is caught in the paralysis of the disappearance of both the ethics of ends and the ethics of means. Clamence is "reduced" to talking to himself, in the Dante-like space between heaven and hell, or at least between the bar "Mexico City" and the Zuider Zee, in the fog, both of gin and the atmosphere, under the picture of the "Just Judges". This is the modern end to the Cartesian starting-point, not as Descartes has it to establish the Cartesian subject, for Clamence, as the "hero of our time", to quote Camus' early title of the work, has no self -- the Cartesian certainty having disappeared. Nor as Camus had earlier set out in *The Rebel* that "I rebel -- therefore we exist" for "others" have disappeared into the dreary power plays and guilt mongering of the old politics. The rebel is equally exterminated in the romantic mists. Camus leaves us with the judge/penitent; a Sartrean serial space, where there will be no bus arriving or, for that matter, no other passengers lining up.

In each work the disappearance of the older spaces for morals, politics and justice is stark. In each work the demise of these spaces ends in the movement from the real, to the more real than real, then to the violent wherein the "justice" and "morals" of the tradition make a final stand. Having been caged the old signifiers make a nasty stand against their disappearance. Here no longer nostalgia, no one longer the true and the just -- not even in EuroDisney but only now the fatal recognition this advanced wave of the old generation that the monstrous claims of the old signifiers can only be fed through increases in sacrificial violence. Each act violently bleeding the social space of the parasites knowing full well of their return -- fatal attractors.

Thus the old Europe, with its values and culture exhausted, with its spaces for morals, religion and politics shrinking, is eclipsed by the new spaces of technical instrumental systems, which expel the older heavier metaphysics for a new pataphysics. For the old Europe, one is left with Camus' Clamence, whose final remarks, having decided that suicide would involve plunging into waters that are too cold, echo throughout each of the novels -- "But let's not worry! It's too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!"

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