

H-France Review Vol. 9 (June 2009), No. 87

Albert Camus, *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947*, ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. xli + 334 pp. Notes, chronology, and bibliography. \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-691-12004-8.

Review by Margaret Atack, University of Leeds.

In 1945, the Swiss-based *Cahiers du Rhône* published an anthology of articles and extracts from the French clandestine press entitled “De la Résistance à la révolution,” a phrase which became *Combat's* slogan and is forever associated with the newspaper, but which also summed up much writing from the Resistance and beyond. Commitment to revolution was a great war cry of mid-twentieth century France, central to the ideas of the non-conformists in the 1930s, of socialists and communists, nationalists and pro-Nazis. It is not surprising that the demand for radical social change, and vehement denunciation of all barriers and constraints, runs throughout Camus's editorials and articles which were gathered together for the first time in their entirety and published to great acclaim by the late Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi in 2002. This excellent translation, faithful, apart from the occasional slip, to the original in style, feeling and accuracy and shortlisted for the 2007 twentieth Translation Prize of the French American Foundation and the Florence Gould Foundation, is entirely to be welcomed, making available to the English-reading world a volume of immense richness for the understanding of Camus and of France at one of the most crucial times in its history.

Camus had himself gathered together three volumes of selected journalism: *Actuelles*, covering articles and interviews from 1944 to 1949, *Actuelles II* (1948-1953) and *Actuelles III: Chroniques algériennes*, from 1939-1958. So what is the benefit of this new volume, *Camus at Combat*? Bringing together all articles and editorials in *Combat* that were either signed by Camus or authenticated as by him, through inclusion in *Actuelles* or by being referred to in his or his wife's correspondence, and those that the balance of probabilities, from internal or external evidence, led to them being reliably attributed to him, provides a proper contextualisation of the better known pieces and an excellent scholarly apparatus through the very extensive notes. The task was not a trivial one: there were no signatures on the clandestine articles, for obvious reasons; many of the post-Occupation editorials and articles were unsigned, on top of which the team ethos created similarities of style, sentiment and analysis. 165 articles and editorials are thus identified.

Journalism was part of Camus's life blood; it was clearly in his soul. From 1938-1940 he wrote for *Alger-républicain*, where the moral concerns of the later journalism, in his denunciation of oppression and demands for political emancipation, are already much in evidence. Paul Nizan described the journalist as “*l'historien de l'immédiat*,” and Camus's strong support of “critical journalism” is similarly offering a commentary that is evaluating, judging, and engaged. Equally important, journalism is the platform on which the identity of the public intellectual is forged; the classic pose of the intellectual is that of the accuser--righter of wrongs and champion of universal values. It is undeniably Camus's work on *Combat* that gives him his high profile as one of the key intellectuals of the post-war period. He had not come through the educational establishments (such as the Henri IV *lycée* and the Ecole Normale Supérieure) which are the consecrated stepping stones for the public intellectual, and his time at *Alger-républicain* had no resonance in Paris. The impact of *L'Etranger* in 1942 had, however, been considerable. This,

plus his role as editor-in-chief at *Combat*, and his association with Sartre and existentialism, placed him at the absolute centre of France's political and cultural life in the summer of 1944. Existentialism, broadly defined, was the philosophy that was embraced as articulating the spirit of the time with its emphasis on choice, commitment and responsibility, and its engagement with the modern, with life, politics and death in the here and now. Camus, Malraux and Saint-Exupéry were all identified as existentialist on these broad thematic grounds, and on their shared problematic of the extreme situation, as Sartre pointed out in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* However different their styles and views, however much Camus in particular would insist upon the distance between them, the now famous photographs of Malraux with Camus in the *Combat* office, of Camus with Sartre, Beauvoir and others in Picasso's studio during the Occupation, and Saint-Exupéry losing his life flying aerial reconnaissance sorties over southern France, all cemented these links in the public consciousness, and indeed in the academy.

While the lack of an index is regrettable, Lévi-Valensi's helpful list of the major themes, drawing on Camus's own classification in *Actuelles*, demonstrates the breadth and also the coherence of Camus's approach to the issues of the day, ranging across the liberation of Paris, the continuation of the war, domestic politics and foreign policy, international politics and colonial politics, as well as self-reflexive analysis of *Combat's* political line, all grouped under the generic title of "History in the Making." "Morality and Politics" is the second major category, constituted by "Flesh," the very famous "Neither Victims nor Executioners," "The Press," "Justice," and "The Church." Not surprisingly, these two, history and morality, are inextricably intertwined throughout the volume. The ethical imperative, the commitment to a core set of values, runs throughout all Camus's journalism, in the same way that his espousal of the values of justice and freedom is enacted through his public commitment to the causes of the day.

Lévi-Valensi's substantial introductions to the history of *Combat* and Camus's involvement in it are not translated for inclusion here, but David Carroll's foreword provides an important contextualisation and analysis of what he presents as a journey from the enthusiasm of the Resistance and its aspirations for post-war France to the stern necessity of combating terror, or the institutionalization of revolutionary goals and demands. Carroll's subtitles sum it up: the purge trials represent the failure of justice, colonialism the failure of politics, terror and silence the failure of the free press. Camus tried to walk what was a very challenging political line in the context of the times, endorsing *Combat's* position that anti-communism was the first step toward dictatorship, yet not adhering to communism (although he had been a member of the Party briefly in the 1930s); not placing political abstractions above humanity; seeing the "philosophy of history" as a discourse of political realism by which the end always justifies the means. The rejection of any legitimization of violence, which runs throughout his journalism and which culminates in the long and controversial analysis of revolt and revolution in *L'Homme révolté*, is an austere position in the turbulence of liberation and its aftermath, including the opening of the camps, and Camus will also acknowledge the justice of execution. These are difficulties which most famously explode in the controversy with François Mauriac over the purges and the death penalty, with the battle lines drawn between Mauriac's argument that charity should prevail, and Camus's counter-argument in favor of justice, a people's justice as he describes it, explaining his impatience with the notion of divine justice. The execution of the former Vichy minister Pierre Pucheu was one case where he considered the end did justify the means, but as time went on he changed his overall position on the executions of the purges.

Naturally a volume of this kind supports any number of different readings. One can read for the light that is thrown on the trajectory of Camus the intellectual, or Camus the author. The importance of solidarity and comradeship, the tragedy of separation and solitude, the necessities and difficulties of language and of silence, the empathy for suffering, loss and oppression, all these crucial underpinnings of Camus's humanism familiar from his fiction are eloquently present here. Perhaps the most poignant thematic category is "Flesh," where Camus is dealing with issues of the torture and death of Resisters, as well as the physical suffering, degradations and humiliations of the camps. They are intensely personal

pages, often involving men and women he knew well, such as René Leynaud, a Resistance journalist shot in 1944, whose loss is also the subject of Francis Ponge's heartbreaking poem "Baptême funèbre."

One can read also for insight into the conflicts of the Liberation and immediate post-war periods for French society, French politics, or French history, which itself has multiple strands. The volume is a mine of fascinating material for understanding debates and developments relating to the post-war reconstruction of France, economically and politically, the relations between France and the United States, France and colonialism, the emerging cold war, and above all perhaps for the place of and attitudes to the Resistance. The story that emerges from Camus's articles is certainly not a story of Resistance triumphalism—the battles against the combined forces of Nazism and Vichy in 1944 give way to his battles to preserve the spirit of the Resistance against various political machinations and the slough of mediocrity which the refusal to stay true to the highest ideals entails. Resistance ideals are betrayed, the language of the Resistance no longer holds sway, and those who have given their lives are in danger of being forgotten; efforts must be made to keep their memory alive. We have become used to a certain representation of the Liberation period as one dominated by the Gaullist myth, the Resistance myth; there is little evidence for that here, but rather a dignified celebration of the tragic minority who died for their beliefs and for the freedom of all, and the failure of post-war politicians to produce the society the vision of which had so powerfully motivated them. Under the Occupation, the fight for the Resistance was captured in the clandestine slogan on the front page of *Combat*: "*un seul combat: pour nos libertés, un seul chef: de Gaulle;*" that fight then translated into the moral demand of carrying resistance through to a revolution in the social order; and the wry subtitle, "De la Résistance à la Restauration" of Claude Bourdet's *L'Aventure incertaine*, memoir of his years as second in command of the *Combat* movement, sums up what so many, including Camus, saw as the failure of the Resistance, as the old habits, old political parties, old enemies reasserted themselves.

The quality and value of Camus's work as the "*historien de l'immédiat*" is thus many-faceted, and the sustained reappraisal that this volume allows brings new light also to some well worn debates. One of the areas where Sartre spelt out with some acidity his differences with Camus, during their hostile confrontation over *L'Homme révolté* in the pages of *Les Temps modernes*, was in relation to history. Picking up Camus's reiteration of the necessity to "enter History," Sartre sarcastically asks him where he thought he was before, and thence proceeds to demolish Camus's notion, as Sartre saw it, of values existing outside History. Sartre's famous obituary of Camus offers a telling contrast. He wrote of the breakdown of their friendship, but also of Camus's continuing importance to him in the "here and now," commenting on the events of the day: "*Cela ne m'empêchait pas de penser à lui, de sentir son regard sur la page du livre, sur le journal qu'il lisait et de me dire: 'Qu'en dit-il? Qu'en dit-il EN CE MOMENT? Son humanisme têtu, étroit et pur, austère et sensuel, livrait un combat douteux contre les événements massifs et difformes de ce temps.*" The rhetoric of "entering history" is certainly present in *Camus at Combat*, but of course there is no sense of history being at any point at a distance; on the contrary, it is embraced wholeheartedly in all its messiness, for the volume has an immediacy and an urgency not matched at all in the other volumes of his journalism. The issues are so many, so varied, and the stakes could not be higher; sitting alongside Camus at the ringside of History, and facing the daily fare of one damn thing after another, the reader can only admire the vehemence and the passion with which Camus maintains his vision of what politics informed by morality could be.

Margaret Atack
University of Leeds
M.K.Ataek@leeds.ac.uk

educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172