

H-France Review Vol. 10 (June 2010), No. 86

Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1951-1959*, trans. and introduction and afterword by Ryan Bloom. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008. xix + 264 pp. \$27.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-56663-775-6.

Review by Mark Orme, University of Central Lancashire.

Albert Camus remains one of the most famous, or infamous, French intellectuals of the twentieth century. “My job,” he notes in an entry taken from the present volume dated 29 May 1958, “is to make my books and to fight when the freedom of my own and my people is threatened. That’s all” (p. 205). Born in Algeria in 1913, Camus grew up in a poverty-stricken environment where food and clothing were scarce and basic commodities like electricity and running water lacking. In his 1958 preface to *L’Envers et l’endroit*, a collection of youthful essays originally published in 1936 which provides an invaluable insight into the nature of Camus’s formative years, he publicly acknowledged that his family had lived “dans la gêne” and that they “manquaient de presque tout.”^[1] However, in that same text, he also makes clear that in living “à mi-distance de la misère et du soleil,”^[2] any sense of injustice which Camus felt about his own childhood experience was more than compensated for by the simple and natural pleasures of the Mediterranean seascape, where “la mer et le soleil ne coûtent rien.”^[3] *Noces*, a further collection of youthful essays originally published in 1939, consolidates and develops this notion of a union with the world and a oneness with nature as a means by which to offset the devastating effects of social hardship.

While still in Algeria, Camus found work on the local anti-colonialist newspapers *Alger républicain* and its short-lived successor *Le Soir républicain*. It is here that Camus first dons the mantle of self-styled revolutionary, his crusading journalism igniting a lifelong quest for justice on behalf of the socially impoverished and politically disfranchised. This underlying concern for social and political justice would also come strongly to the fore in Camus’s wartime journalism for the clandestine *Combat*, where his celebrated editorials provided a potent rallying cry defending moral values in the face of Nazi nihilism.

It was also during this wartime period that Camus published the first of what have since gone on to become his canonical works. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *L’Étranger* both appeared in 1942, followed by the plays *Le Malentendu* (1944) and *Caligula* (1945). In the post-war years, when Camus was forced to grapple with a series of complex ethical issues impacting on his moral sensibility, he produced *La Peste* (1947), *L’État de siège* (1948) and *Les Justes* (1949), a play discussing how standards of morality can be maintained in revolutionary action and which is arguably even more pertinent today than when it originally appeared. The result of Camus’s post-war moral reasoning and a text in which he invested considerable time and energy, *L’Homme révolté* was published in 1951. This controversial work was met with a generally hostile reception, notably on the political left in France, and this culminated in a very public polemic with his one-time friend Jean-Paul Sartre, played out in the pages of *Les Temps modernes* in the summer of 1952. “Paris is a jungle,” reads a contemporaneous entry in Camus’s notebook, “and there the wild beasts are seedy” (p. 50). As a result of this disagreement, the two men would never speak to one another again, and the profound psychological impact which this rupture had on Camus was something from which he never fully recovered. Of this public polemic, Camus wrote in the volume currently under review that “it’s a mass collection of darkness and gloom” (p. 33). At the same time, events in his beloved Algeria in the 1950s cast a long shadow over Camus’s final years, and his retreat

into silence over the Algerian Civil War translates into a crushing inability to deal with the situation in any rational terms. As he pointed out to André Rosfelder in private correspondence dated February 26, 1956, “il y a, en ce moment, en moi quelqu’un qui meurt de honte. Si je voyais une action possible, même la plus folle, je la tenterais. ... Mais nous dévalons vers l’abîme, nous y sommes déjà.... Je suis déchiré, voilà la vérité.”[4] This frame of mind is reflected in a desperate entry from the present volume dated July 29, 1958: “Algeria obsesses me this morning. Too late, too late... My land lost, I would be worth nothing” (p. 231).

Be that as it may, these last few years of Camus’s life also produced some of his most celebrated writing with *La Chute*, notably, published to critical acclaim in 1956. This was followed by *L’Exil et le royaume*, a collection of short stories which appeared in 1957—the same year that Camus received the Nobel Prize for Literature—and, at the time of his untimely death in January 1960, he was working on a new autobiographical project, *Le Premier Homme*, published posthumously in France in 1994, which promised to be a work of great significance for the writer, both personally and professionally.

From 1935 right up until his death, Camus kept private notebooks which served as a sounding board for proposed new projects, a catalogue of maxims and reflections from authors and acquaintances and—particularly in the later years—a *journal intime*. The first two volumes of these *cahiers* appeared in the original French in the period immediately following Camus’s death, with the equivalent English-language editions appearing shortly afterwards. The third and final volume, however, covering the last traumatic years of Camus’s life, was not published in France until 1989, as the work was deemed by Camus’s benefactors at the time as being too personal to justify public scrutiny. “I know now why I never kept a personal diary,” observes Camus in an entry for the present edition dated August 1958: “for me life is secretive” (p. 233). Indeed, unlike the previously published notebooks, the majority of which were corrected by Camus himself at the typescript stage, only the very first *cahier* of the present edition was made into a typescript while Camus was still alive, and even this one was only partially corrected by the author before his death. Correspondingly, this volume provides the first English edition of what, in the words of the blurb, gives us “our rawest and most intimate glimpse yet into one of the most important voices of French letters and twentieth-century literature.” The book covers the period from March 1951, when Camus was working on *L’Homme révolté*, through to the end of December 1959 and, as a whole, the volume provides a poignant insight into a mind-set often bedevilled by changing personal and historical circumstances. The following entries, extracted at random from the present edition, provide a useful overview of this troubled frame of mind on Camus’s part which is in evidence throughout this turbulent period: “I await with patience a catastrophe that is slow in coming” (December 1951, p. 20); “I have the most dreadful opinion of myself, for days on end” (p. 21); “If I were to die this evening, I would die with an awful feeling previously unknown to me, which, nonetheless, causes me pain this evening. The feeling that I have helped and continue to help many people—and yet nobody comes to help me....Not proud of myself” (February 1952, p. 32); “The one thing that has always saved me amid all my prostrations is that I have never stopped believing in what, for lack of anything better, I will call ‘my star.’ But today, I no longer believe in it” (p. 47); “for some years now, my work has not freed me, it has enslaved me” (February 1953, p. 63); “Somebody inside of me has always tried, with all his strength, to be nobody” (p. 102); “It’s not dying that I fear, but living in death” (September 1954, p. 109); “Nobel. Strange feeling of overwhelming pressure and melancholy. At 20 years old, poor and naked, I knew true glory. My mother” (October 1957, p. 197); and “I struggle like a fish caught in the net’s meshes” (March 1959, p. 241).

Yet these notebooks represent far more than a personal description of despair on the part of the author. As Ryan Bloom observes in his preliminary Translator’s Note to the present edition, “to look at a writer’s raw notebooks, his unpolished jottings, is to see a man, to know his works, and to watch them grow” (p. ix). Accordingly, we read of projects Camus had in the pipeline, from jottings for his autobiographical novel *Le Premier Homme*, to notes on what was to have been a significant essay on the Greek goddess Nemesis, as well as projected plays on the themes of love and a hybrid “Don Juan Faust.”

“Poems on missing Algeria” are also mentioned (p. 56). An entry from 1952 reveals Camus’s perception of his anticipated work: “My future books won’t turn away from the problem of the hour. But I would like them to subjugate it rather than be subjugated by it. In other words, I dream of a freer creation, with the same contents.... Then I will know if I am a true artist” (p. 35). A similar entry from the following year marking the publication of a collection of political articles also testifies to Camus’s desire to put the past behind him and embrace his future work with renewed vigour: “October ’53. Publication of *Actuelles II*. The inventory is complete—the commentary and polemic. From now on, creation” (p. 89). And an entry dated December 11, 1954 highlights Camus’s determination to confront reality head-on: “Regain health at all cost. I need my strength. I do not need life to be easy for me but I want to be able to match myself up to it if it is difficult” (p. 130).

In addition, the volume bears eloquent witness to the wide-ranging reading programme in which Camus was engaged during this time, with references to, amongst others, Ibsen, Nietzsche, Stendhal, Tocqueville and Tolstoy all featuring heavily. And there are also brief moments of unbridled happiness apparent in these pages, such as the visits Camus makes in November 1954 to Turin—“Dear Italy”, he notes, “where I will be cured of everything” (p. 163)—and Genoa, where the “superb monuments erupt in a tight corset of small streets crawling with life” (p. 119) and where “beauty is made on the spot..., radiating in the life of everyday” (p. 119); his trip to Rome, “where nothing exhausts the silence, the peace, the world always emerging and always perfect”, and where Camus “began to rediscover [him]self” (p. 121); the rejuvenating effect of going back to his beloved Algiers with its “O welcoming night toward which I finally return and which faithfully receives me as in days gone by” and where “inhaling the scent fills [him] with joy, with youth” (p. 136); and the delight of “these twenty days of racing through Greece” in April-May 1956 which “seem to me like a lone and lengthy source of light that I will be able to keep at the center of my life” (p. 158).

Indeed, as the volume nears its close, there is generally a more upbeat feel to the entries. This reflects the rejuvenated mind-set which Camus, toward the end of his life, was apparently developing and which comes into particularly sharp focus in the following entry from early 1958: “Stages of healing. Letting volition sleep. Enough of ‘you must,’ Completely depoliticize the mind in order to humanize it.... Remain close to the reality of beings and things. Return as often as possible to personal happiness.... Recognize the need for enemies. Love that they exist” (pp. 203-04). This inner resolve to embrace the future makes the fact of Camus’s premature death all the more tragic.

Bloom’s English translation remains faithful to Camus’s original text, and the brief introduction, annotations and afterword offer a useful context for the entries and period as a whole. Indeed, the volume is very readable both for the Camus specialist and non-specialist alike, and the reader will find much of interest in these pages which demonstrate clearly that Camus’s voice continues to resonate today, almost fifty years after his death. Camus cuts an emotional figure in these pages, as he tries to deal with shifting sands at both a personal and professional level. And yet, if the present volume clearly demonstrates the challenges Camus faced throughout the final, turbulent years of his life, one should also note Camus’s generally stoical attitude. As he poignantly notes in an entry dated January 1956 when the Algerian “problem” was in full bloom, “it is in the struggle, finally, that I’ve always found my peace” (p. 167).

NOTES

[1] Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi et al., eds., *Albert Camus: Œuvres complètes, I (1931-1944)* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, 2006), p. 32.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Ibid.

[4] Cited by Olivier Todd, in *Albert Camus, une vie*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), pp. 634-35.

Mark Orme
University of Central Lancashire
mporme@uclan.ac.uk

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit 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