
H-France Review Vol. 17 (September 2017), No. 161

Alice Kaplan, *Looking for the Stranger: Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic*
Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 288 pp. Maps, bibliography, and index. \$26.00
U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-2262-4167-8.

Review by André Benhaïm, Princeton University.

Just when you thought you knew the Stranger, another story comes along. The Stranger, it turns out, is not just the protagonist of Albert Camus's most famous and celebrated novel, *L'Étranger*. The Stranger is not, as it happens, only Meursault. The Stranger is the book itself. This is the story that Alice Kaplan tells in a book that showcases the skills that earned her her place among the top scholars in the humanities, and in French literature and culture in particular. This essay, however, transcends the genre of academic work. It is an essay, in the "French" sense of the term, with a bold momentum that reveals the personal engagement of the author with the subject of her investigation (literally, as we'll see), and creates (or deepens) the readers' own sense of personal engagement with a book and an author they thought were familiar.

If Alice Kaplan is an outstanding scholar, one should also praise her talent as a writer. The opening of the book reads like the overture of a novel, not only in the suggestive, inspired prose, but also in the choice for the scene, the actual staging of the whole essay. In this puzzling tour de force where she begins with an end, Kaplan chooses to make us witness to Camus burning all his letters, "in October 1939, a month after France declared war on Germany" (p. 7). Unfit for military service (and therefore war) because of his health (he had been diagnosed with tuberculosis as a teenager), Camus is shown here, at twenty-five, in an apparent act of (self) destruction as he had only begun to take his career as a novelist more seriously (after having published two essays and a play). And this, his first novel, *A Happy Death* (*La Mort heureuse*), despite his first real failure as a writer, remained an abandoned manuscript until its eventual publication in 1971, more than a decade after the author's death. This bonfire, as Kaplan suggestively calls it, reminds us of another one, no less symbolic. Although Kaplan doesn't take us there, this bonfire recalls Joseph Grand's own *autodafé* in what would be Camus's next novel, *The Plague* (*La Peste*). Published in 1947, *The Plague*, in which the Algerian city of Oran is quarantined because of an outbreak of plague that decimates its population and creates havoc among its population, has often been read as an allegory of the Nazi occupation of France. And when he was criticized (by people like Roland Barthes, for instance) for not having made the place of history explicit enough in the book, Camus responded that he had written a novel meant to reach beyond (in time and space) the single event of the Second World War and to denounce more than the specific tyranny of Nazism. In this "ode to resistance," as Kaplan calls it (p. 195), Grand, a deceptively insignificant secondary character who embodies the figure of the struggling writer, decides to burn his entire manuscript when he learns that he, too, has been infected with the disease that is decimating Oran. It looks like the act of a desperate man who has given up all hopes. It looks like the suicide of a man certain to be sentenced to death. However, once he miraculously survives, he claims heroically that, no matter, he will write his book again (even though the "book" in question had only consisted of fifty pages of variations on one single sentence, thereby illustrating Kaplan's just remark: "Camus was a craftsman who believed in the benefits of rewriting, in literary equity" (p. 28). This resilience

in the face of destruction (or *in* destruction per se) lies at the heart of the act Kaplan shows us that Camus is performing. “What Camus saved from the flames that day in October was his literary future: Montherlant’s words of praise [for Camus’s second essay, *Nuptials (Noces)*]; the notebook where he jotted down images and ideas; the manuscript of his failed experience in fiction, *A Happy Death*” (p. 15). In the end, Kaplan’s powerful suggestion is that from the ashes of this bonfire—an act of purification as it were, more than sacrifice—would rise *The Stranger*.

As I suggested above, if writing the history of *The Stranger* is a daunting challenge it is not only because it calls for finding the evidence of its genesis. It is also because Camus resented (or at the very least, was very wary of) history itself. In the foreword of the new publication of his early essay *The Wrong Side and the Right Side (L’Envers et l’Endroit)*, originally published in Algiers in 1937, Camus famously wrote: “I was poised midway between poverty and sunshine. Poverty prevented me from judging that all was well in the world and in history, the sun taught me that history is not everything.” In retracing the history of the advent of the novel, Kaplan took a risk. And this boldness is what makes her essay all the more compelling. For the book goes far beyond an explanation, and it is by no means just an extensive collection of footnotes or an erudite “companion” to the novel. It is, as I said in the beginning, a story—only not a fictional one.

To be sure, Kaplan deploys remarkable skills to retell Camus’s biography while revealing the birth and becoming of his work. Not shying away from leaning on his most expert biographers such as Herbert Lottman or Olivier Todd, she nonetheless manages to make her personal voice heard and to create her own space for interpretation. The most notable example of this deals of course with her approach to the central scene of the novel: Meursault’s killing of the Arab on the beach.

As Kaplan goes on telling the stories of both the man and his work, it becomes increasingly clear that, in many ways, *The Stranger* mirrors Camus’s perpetual intermediacy. The underprivileged Algerian-born Frenchman who was already as a journalist and activist denouncing the injustice done by the colonizing power to indigenous Arab and Kabyle populations, wrote his seminal novel between Algiers and Paris—between home and exile, between two newspapers he worked for, *Alger-Républicain* and *Paris-Soir*. His novel is divided into two parts—one outside under the sun, the other in the darkness of prison—and reaches its climax on the liminal space of the beach between land and sea. And this is where Kaplan’s gift as a scholar/storyteller also reaches its acme. Meursault’s murder of the Arab was inspired by an anecdote: a brawl on the beach in Oran and not Algiers between Raoul Bensoussan and an Arab. If the event did result in a knife wound to Bensoussan (who is akin to Raymond in the novel), it didn’t, however, end in the Arab’s death, given that Bensoussan never fired the weapon he had with him. This story, as Kaplan makes a point in calling it, is the one told by Bensoussan’s biographers to Camus’s decades later. As it stands, it is already fascinating. For instance, as Kaplan stresses, it is difficult to imagine that the two men kept quiet like their fictitious alter egos when one realizes that Bensoussan was Jewish and therefore a French citizen like all Algerian Jews since the 1871 Décret Crémieux, which exacerbated tensions between these two native North African communities. Knowing that Raymond’s model was Jewish gives one pause in light of the virtual absence of Jews in Camus’s fiction. Kaplan addresses the situation of Jews in Algeria in Camus’s time and especially after the dramatic change of their status under the Vichy regime, which, in October 1940 and after a series of anti-Semitic measures, stripped them of their French citizenship, dismissed Jewish officers from the army, and expelled Jewish children from public schools, many of whom, as Kaplan recalls, were tutored by Camus in Oran.

Kaplan’s evocation of this painful part of French Algeria’s history tied to the collective identity of entire populations anticipates her most significant discovery: the dramatic outcome of her search, linked to the identity of individuals left intentionally blurry by Camus. From the story of the invisible Jew to the story of the anonymous Arab, Kaplan ends her book with a spectacular coda.

Not content with telling the genesis of *The Stranger*, Kaplan also tells the amazing becoming or “afterlife” of Camus’s most celebrated novel. From its American consecration during Camus’s New York journey in 1946, she takes us to the most recent and most audacious tribute: Kamel Daoud’s 2013 novel, *The Meursault Investigation* (*Meursault, Contre-Enquête*).^[1] To be sure, “tribute” is not the term everyone would use to evoke this novel whose protagonist, Harun, recounts the story of his brother Musa, the man Meursault killed. Daoud’s novel goes beyond this plot, denouncing the dysfunction of contemporary Algerian politics and society, but it is above all a response to Camus’s novel, and Kaplan brilliantly assesses all its mirroring effects. A reductive reading might lead some to see in Daoud’s endeavor the attribution of a name and a life to Camus’s anonymous Arab in order to answer and adhere to the famous criticism made by one of the major founders of post-colonial studies, Edward Said, whom Kaplan quotes: “The Arabs of *The Stranger* are nameless beings used as background for the portentous metaphysics explored by Camus.”^[2] When Kaplan asserts that Daoud’s fiction “recovered Musa and Meursault from the ruins of history,”^[3] it is to wonder “what is left for nonfiction to do?” (p. 210). That question, which opens the essay’s epilogue does not remain unanswered for long. In a gripping narration of her trips to Oran, Kaplan unveils her discovery of the “real” Arab. His name was Kaddour Touil. Feeling already uneasy for having spoiled this astonishing twist, I will let the readers discover on their own its development. I imagine, however, that some will feel unnerved by the very end of Kaplan’s book, where she establishes unexpected correspondences between Touil and Camus. The moving conclusion echoes the opinion Daoud shared with Kaplan: “We don’t read *The Stranger* the same way Americans, French, Algerians.... We each have our ‘lecture fantasmée,’ our reading fantasy” (p. 210). Whatever one thinks of her personal conclusion of this search for *The Stranger* ending with the “fantasy of reconciliation” between Kaddour Touil and Albert Camus (p. 217), it must be recognized that Kaplan’s essay is as thought-provoking and intelligent as it is poetic and will certainly become a classic itself.

NOTES

[1] Kamel Daoud, *Meursault, Contre-Enquête* (Algiers: Éditions Barzakh, 2013; Arles: Actes Sud, 2014). In English, *The Meursault Investigation*, translated by John Cullen (New York: Other Press, 2015).

[2] Edward Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” *Critical Inquiry* 15.2 (1989): 223; cited by Kaplan on page 203.

[3] I cannot, here, comment further on the term of “ruin,” but it would be interesting to elaborate on a discussion involving more of Said’s remarks. In the chapter “Camus and the French Imperial Experience” in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), Said goes on to say: “Camus’s novels and stories thus very precisely distil the traditions, idioms, and discursive strategies of France’s appropriation of Algeria” (p. 184), and he concludes stating “Camus’s narratives have a negative vitality, in which the tragic human seriousness of the colonial effort achieves its last great clarification before ruin overtakes it” (p. 185).

André Benhaïm
Princeton University
abenhaïm@princeton.edu

Copyright © 2017 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 edistribution/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 republication 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