

Camus, the Liberation, and *La Peste*: A Fresh Look

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Albert Camus was a prominent figure in the liberation of France fifty years ago. He joined the Resistance late, but having done so, he risked his life by writing in the underground newspaper *Combat* some of its most memorable editorials, such as "Pendant trois heures, ils ont fusillé des Français" (May 1944).¹ He continued to write for *Combat* during and after the Liberation; this regular journalism informs us what the "public" Camus was thinking about the momentous events unfolding before his eyes. He was arguing that those who had just liberated themselves from the invader, and from the invader's locally recruited henchmen, had now to liberate themselves from themselves and from all the old familiar ways of the prewar era.² The practice of liberty, Camus insisted in these *Combat* editorials, was nothing less than permanent liberation (i.e., more like a permanent and interiorized revolution *à la* Trotsky than a single, accomplished, and therefore oppressive event such as is associated with the name of Stalin).

The private Camus, however, inevitably had a more nuanced attitude to the events of that time: his wife Francine, from whom he had been separated by the circumstances of war, was to rejoin him as soon as more settled conditions made travel possible again. He had not been faithful to her during her absence. This would not have mattered if the infidelity had been a mere flirtation such as this man, obsessed as he was with the figure of Don Juan, routinely indulged in. But he had in fact embarked upon an affair with the great love of his life, the actress Maria Casarès, who in June 1944 had created the role of Martha in *Le Malentendu*.

Out of respect for Francine Camus and her children Jean and Catherine, the full story of the Camus's marriage has not been told. The standard biography by H.R. Lottman³ treads delicately around the issue; Patrick McCarthy's critical biography⁴ is more candid, but less well informed. Enough is known, however, to invite us to reread Camus's writings of this period in a fresh light. This article concentrates not so much on the essays and journalism of the period as on *La Peste*,⁵ which has long been seen as a fable about the Occupation. At the end of the novel, the plague is over, but the author's surrogate, Dr. Rieux, is left a widower, unable to participate fully in the *Kermesse* in the streets. My paper proposes a psychocritical reading of the closing pages of *La Peste*, Camus's fictional treatment of the Liberation and of his own mixed feelings about it.

¹ "For Three Hours, They Shot French People," reprinted in *Presse clandestine 1940-1944* by Claude Bellanger (Paris: Armand Colin, 1961) 204-05.

² Paul Viallaneix, "Souvenirs d'un lecteur de *Combat*," in *Albert Camus*, ed. Paul-F. Smets (Brussels: Bruylant, 1985) 54.

³ Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979).

⁴ Patrick McCarthy, *Camus: A Critical Study of His Life and Work* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982).

⁵ Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

First, though, let us get a few things about the Liberation into proper perspective. Compared with the USSR, for example, France—and especially Paris—got off remarkably lightly under German occupation. To take but one example where human lives were concerned, the thousands of French *fusillés* and *déportés* do not begin to compare with the millions of Soviet POWs who (not being protected by the Geneva Convention, which the USSR had refused to sign) were murdered in cold blood, or were beaten and starved to death as slave labor. To take another example where property was involved, destruction in France was heavy in a wide arc across the north of the country from Brest to Calais, as can be seen today in the drab rebuilt towns of Normandy or Picardy, but this was mainly caused by the fighting, not by a deliberate scorched earth policy such as the Germans carried out in their retreat on the eastern front. Most important of all, Paris was not reduced to rubble, as were so many historic cities in the east like Königsberg, Budapest, Warsaw, Dresden, and Danzig—Danzig, of which Günter Grass wrote poignantly in *The Tin Drum*, "what had taken seven hundred years to build burned down in three days."⁶ The whole of humanity owes an immeasurable debt to General von Choltitz for disobeying his Führer's order to blow Paris up. Even fifty years later the thought of the finest of all cities ablaze from Notre Dame to the Arc de Triomphe, as Grass's Danzig burned from St. Catherine's to Crane Gate, still sends a cold shudder down the spine.

As for the intellectuals, any objective reader of their memoirs or biographies⁷ must agree with Beckett's self-deprecating remark about his own resistance activity: "boy scout stuff."⁸ Camus, it is true, was disenchanted early on with his fellow-intellectuals' rhetoric, including, one suspects, his own. His own position was admirably analyzed at the 1985 Nanterre colloquium "Camus et la politique," especially in papers presented by Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-Jacques Becker. Quoting from a letter of 18 November 1951 to the editor of *Arts*, and from the *Discours de Suède*, Rioux shows how Camus struggled, after the Liberation, to "sauver d'un certain désastre ce qui mérite de l'être," to "tirer les conséquences de [mon] déchirement," and, in a nuclear age, to "empêcher que le monde ne se dé fasse."⁹

I shall not attempt to add to, even less argue with, the findings of these colleagues. Instead, as I have already suggested, I want to subject the final pages of *La Peste* to a close reading. Two preliminary observations may be helpful at the outset.

First, the novel is set in Oran. This was the hometown of Camus's second wife, Francine Faure. But whereas his first novel, *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*, 1942) was set in Algiers, and presented a realistic picture of the city as it then was, a lively capital where Europeans and Arabs lived side by side, the setting of *La Peste* is the reverse of naturalistic. Oran had of course a large Arab population, but Arabs do not feature in the story. Their curiously deserted streets, and even

⁶ Günther Grass, *The Tin Drum* Trans. Ralph Manheim (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 382.

⁷ See, for instance, *La Force de l'âge* by Simone de Beauvoir (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), or *Antimémoires* by André Malraux (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

⁸ See my forthcoming essay "Beckett and World War II," in *Modern Irish Writers and the Wars*, ed. K. Devine.

⁹ *Camus et la politique*, ed. Jeanyves Guérin (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986) 97 and 105.

the fronts of their houses, do appear, but more in the nature of a film lot. The characters are exclusively European. This makes the atmosphere of the novel somewhat surreal, like a townscape by De Chirico or Paul Delvaux. Camus probably did not consciously intend this, but its unconscious significance will, I hope, become clearer as my argument develops.

Second, the novel took some seven years to complete—from about 1939 to 1946, the entire period of the war and the first year or so of the Fourth Republic—and it went through several drafts (far more, incidentally, than *L'Étranger*, which was written fairly quickly). Early drafts ended at p. 1458 of the Pléiade edition¹⁰ (i.e., the last two chapters, beginning respectively "Les portes de la ville s'ouvrirent enfin" and "Cette chronique touche à sa fin," were only sketched in the early manuscripts, and were not written out in full until later, almost certainly after the Liberation). As Camus's editor, Roger Quilliot, points out: "Un fragment manuscrit . . . prouve qu'aux lendemains de la Libération . . . les deux derniers chapitres n'en faisaient encore qu'un seul. . . . Ce texte débute par une évocation de l'ouverture des portes . . . et [par] des réflexions diverses sur la séparation qui servent de base à l'avant-dernier chapitre, pour se terminer sur la visite au vieux malade et la méditation sur Oran. Rambert n'apparaissait toujours pas à ce stade de la rédaction, et l'on ne trouve pas trace de l'accès de folie de Cottard" (1996). Moreover, in the redrafting process Camus "découvrit mieux ce que [la guerre] signifiait de souffrances pour chacun" (1933), and in particular, as Quilliot reveals, laid more and more emphasis on the pain of separation: "Camus . . . ajouta [au ms.1] plusieurs feuillets, intitulés 'séparation.' Sans doute postérieures à la Libération, ils analysent longuement les réactions des 'séparés' à l'heure des retrouvailles" (1996). Quilliot, quoting from the manuscript, goes on to show that for Camus "la peste avait été d'abord séparation," and that he deliberately added the word "séparés" twice on the final draft of the penultimate chapter.

One does not need to be a psychoanalyst to be alert to the significance of these two interrelated observations: first, that the novel is set in a surreal version of the native city of *the wife whom Camus had left behind*, and second, that the final version laid greater stress on *separation* as a major consequence of the plague than earlier versions did. As Quilliot's helpful study of the manuscript variants demonstrates, the suffering inflicted by the plague—particularly the enforced separation of people who loved each other—became clearer to Camus as the Occupation dragged on.

For, as is well known—Camus not having been at all reticent in pointing it out—*La Peste* is a fable. Oran's epidemic of bubonic plague is a metaphor for the Occupation. The citizens of this surreal Oran suffer from the plague, and between 1940 and 1944 French people were oppressed by the Nazi invader: in both cases, Camus suggests, they were made wiser and better by the experience; ennobled indeed, with the dignity of their humanity enhanced. They had merited what in its unself-conscious rhetoric the novel refers to as "le triomphe et l'injustice du bonheur" (1462), and had earned the joy that comes to reward those "qui se suffisent de l'homme et de son pauvre et terrible amour" (1465). On this level the novel is

¹⁰ Albert Camus, *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade). Henceforth page numbers refer to this edition.

both moving and convincing, a "sermon of hope" in the words of Conor Cruise O'Brien, conveying a "deep sense of the joy of life," a tale in which "the almost unremitting grimness of the narrative is subtly transformed by a current of dry crisp gaiety in the prose."¹¹ The contrast between the grimness of the subject matter and the gaiety of the style is as significant, psychologically, as the emphasis on separation, and I shall be returning to it.

First, though, let us go through the last fifteen pages or so of *La Peste*, "à l'affût de mots et d'expressions à forte coloration psychanalytique."¹²

Starting where the first manuscript version peters out, we have the death of Tarrou, followed closely by the (not unexpected) news of the death of Rieux's own wife. It is while he is keeping vigil over Tarrou's body that Rieux thinks of her, tries not to think of her, thinks (à propos of his mother) that "un amour n'est jamais assez fort pour trouver sa propre expression" (1456), and the next day receives the news of his wife's death calmly (1457), no doubt because this particular pain is just a continuation, a mere further extension, of the more general pain which he and the entire city have been suffering for months (1458).

In the absence of a definitive biography we do not know the precise date when this text was drafted, any more than we know exactly when Camus and Maria Casarès became lovers, but from piecing together various bits of information in Quilliot's annotations to the Pléiade edition it seems a reasonable deduction that the draft predates the affair by over a year. We cannot therefore make the simplistic assumption that Rieux receives the news of his wife's death calmly because Albert would have liked Francine out of the way so that he could continue his affair with Maria unhindered. I am glad about this. Not only would it be a crude conclusion to draw, it would also be a gross calumny, since it would not square with what we know about Camus's relations with women, namely that he liked and respected them, but was by temperament polygamous. He could thus see nothing untoward in loving two (sometimes more) women at once, especially since he loved them in different ways. Although relations between Francine and himself grew strained towards the end of his life, when they lived more or less apart, there was never any question of divorce. Francine was the mother of his children: Camus was too much a man of the Mediterranean not to revere her in that capacity, just as he continued to cherish his own mother, even though they had little in common. (One remembers how, over Algeria, he shocked the *bien-pensants* when he said that if he had to choose between his mother and justice, he would choose his mother, but this should have surprised no one: any man born well south of a line drawn from, say, Bordeaux to Kiev would feel the same).

So having set that unworthy suggestion aside, what does Rieux's fatalism about his wife's death mean in psychoanalytical terms? Simply that Camus was not sentimental about sexual love. Lamartine's notion that "un seul être vous manque, et tout est dépeuplé"¹³ would have been quite alien to him. Again, I think

¹¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus* (London: Fontana, 1970) 50.

¹² As Lacan might say; see my *Novel and Reader* (London: Marion Boyars, 1980) 91-120.

¹³ See Raymond Federman and John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) 109.

this is a southern European attitude. Characteristic of northern Europe is Ingmar Bergman's late authorial masterpiece *The Best Intentions*, the story of his parents' all-consuming and all-conquering love affair, behind which lies the powerful—but happily false—northern notion that "on n'aime qu'une fois, la première."¹⁴ Rieux has lost his wife, whom he loved, but he stoically carries on with the business of living, and Camus would have felt just the same if Francine had been killed by a stray bullet in 1943.

When the city gates are opened, public rejoicing is given free rein, with church bells ringing wildly (1461), "cris d'allégresse" (1472), "orchestres aux carrefours" (1462), and fireworks "dans la nuit maintenant libérée" (1471—note the revealing adjective "libérée." Rieux feels excluded from it: ". . . lui-même [était] de ceux qui n'avaient pas la liberté de s'y mêler tout entiers"; like Rambert, "il avait changé, la peste avait mis en lui une distraction . . . qui . . . continuait en lui comme une sourde angoisse" (1459-60). But other people do not appear troubled by any such obscure dread or sense of foreboding: they cheerfully "fraternize" and feel complete "equality" (note those two words from the motto of the French Republic, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"), at least for a few hours (1462). Here too we get, significantly, the first of many references to the ecstatic reunion of people separated for many months, and to the uninhibited expression of their physical longing for each other: "excités . . . de nombreux couples enlacés . . . ne craignaient pas de se donner en spectacle. Tous criaient ou riaient" (1462).

Camus may not state it explicitly, but the language used here clearly suggests that, although such reactions to the removal of the terror ("terreur" 1463) under which people have been living for so long are understandable enough, they nevertheless betray shallowness and ignorance. This is in line with the sentiments expressed in his editorials, namely that rejoicing at liberation from German domination was premature, since *gérer la paix* ("la paix" is specifically, and significantly, mentioned on p. 1464) would, compared with conducting the war, be *autrement délicat*. This is one strand of meaning in the famous closing sentences of the novel. "Cette allégresse était toujours menacée," Camus insists, because—as Rieux the *savant* and he know, but the benighted multitude does not know—the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good but lies dormant in furniture and linen chests, ready to "réveill[er] ses rats et les env[oyer] mourrir dans une cité heureuse" (1472). The fable approaches complete transparency with the parallel drawn between the plague and the Holocaust (in the reference to "four[s] [dont] s'évaporai[ent] [des] fumées grasses," 1463, proving that the passage postdates the liberation of Bergen-Belsen), a point made even more forcibly later in Jean Cayrol's spoken commentary to Alain Resnais's documentary *Nuit et brouillard*, namely that any railway line, however innocuous-seeming, can lead to a concentration camp. It is therefore significant that this particular strand of meaning turns on the word "déchirement" (1472), the very same word that occurs in the letter to *Arts* mentioned above: for it is the voice of the public Camus speaking, Camus the moralist and political commentator, warning his compatriots that the forces of tyranny and oppression are never definitively vanquished, just as bubonic plague can never be completely eradicated.

¹⁴ Ingmar Bergman, *The Best Intentions*, trans. Joan Tate (London: Harvill, 1993).

But there is another, more subterranean, less conscious strand of meaning in this closing passage, as I have said. As is well known, Dr. Rieux, who up till then had been referred to in the third person as one of the leading characters, reveals at the end of the story that he has all along, in fact, been none other than the narrator, the diligent recorder of events. Still speaking in the third person, he has, he says, tried to be an objective witness, and as a consequence he has had to suppress all mention of his personal feelings, "son attente, ses épreuves" (1466). But at the end he gives us a starkly revealing, albeit fleeting, glimpse into what he has personally suffered. Happy, he says, those who did not experience the twofold separation that some have had to endure through having failed, in the days before the epidemic, to build their love from the outset on a solid basis. The impersonal pronouns and stilted expression do not deceive.¹⁵ What Rieux is saying in deliberately veiled terms is that he spent years blindly groping for the pact, so slow and hard to come by, that in the long run binds together ill-assorted lovers ("le difficile accord qui finit par sceller l'un à l'autre des amants ennemis," 1465). Such people have, like Rieux himself, had the rashness to count overmuch on time, and now they are parted for ever.

Unlike the more limpid passage describing Tarrou's wake and Rieux's opening the telegram informing him of his wife's death—a simplistic reading of which we excluded at an earlier stage—the hermetic utterance I have just quoted was probably written after Camus had fallen in love with Maria Casarès. The passage only makes sense, certainly, if it was written later. Its meaning then becomes clear: it explains why Rieux cannot rejoice with other people when the town is liberated from the plague. The words employed suggest that he has failed to build a satisfactory relationship with his wife before the onset of the epidemic, and now that she is dead it is too late. Francine Camus was not dead, of course, only living far away on the remote Allied side of the war zone, but since Camus had lost all contact with her she must have seemed dead. Maria Casarès, on the other hand, was *bel et bien vivante*, and close at hand. In the same way, the reason why Oran is depicted without an Arab population is because few Arabs were domiciled in Paris in those days. Since Paris was where Maria Casarès lived, Paris is where the novel is "really" set. And the Germans, the true "plague," were in Paris too, not in Oran. In other words, Francine's Oran was soon unconsciously transformed into Maria's Paris.

No wonder Camus's feelings were mixed when he heard the bells ringing out to announce Paris's liberation from the hated conqueror. No wonder his alter ego Rieux wanders the streets of Oran alone, unable to join in the celebrations. He almost regrets the departure of the plague, since struggling with it enabled him to forget his personal anguish. Similarly, is it altogether too fanciful to read the end of *La Peste* as meaning that Camus unconsciously regretted the departure of the Germans, and wrote his monitory editorials in defiance of—and in order to suppress conscious awareness of—the ambivalence of his mood, the mood of a man knowing that he would soon have to choose between the two women in his life? Might that not also explain Conor Cruise O'Brien's paradox, noted above, that the grimness of *La Peste's* subject matter is strangely at odds with the nervous exhila-

¹⁵ Especially if the reader is assisted (as I have been here) by Stuart Gilbert's admirable English translation *The Plague* (New York: Knopf, 1948), which clears up the willful obscurities.

ration of the prose? It would certainly account for the equally striking fact that the tone of the *Combat* editorials is at variance with that of the peroration of the "sermon" (O'Brien's term, again) on which Camus was working at the same time: *La Peste*.

After all, it was Sartre—no less—who claimed that the French had never been so free as under German occupation. Might not Camus similarly have wondered whether he had ever been so happy as he was in the closing months of the Occupation, far from his wife, free to enjoy the company of a lover from whom he would only be finally parted by the car crash that killed him fifteen years later on the N6 highway to Paris? He would have been less than human, surely, if the heretical thought never once crossed his mind.