

"Ces forces obscures de l'âme"

*Women, race and origins
in the writings of Albert Camus*

Christine Margerrison

FAUX
TITRE

“Ces forces obscures de l’âme”

FAUX TITRE

311

Etudes de langue et littérature françaises
publiées sous la direction de

Keith Busby, M.J. Freeman,
Sjef Houppermans et Paul Pelckmans

“Ces forces obscures de l’âme”

*Women, race and origins
in the writings of Albert Camus*

Christine Margerrison



AMSTERDAM - NEW YORK, NY 2008

Maquette couverture / Cover design: Pier Post.

The paper on which this book is printed meets the requirements of
'ISO 9706: 1994, Information and documentation - Paper for documents -
Requirements for permanence'.

Le papier sur lequel le présent ouvrage est imprimé remplit les prescriptions
de 'ISO 9706: 1994, Information et documentation - Papier pour documents -
Prescriptions pour la permanence'.

ISBN: 978-90-420-2379-6

© Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam - New York, NY 2008

Printed in The Netherlands

For Peter, Nick and Lucy

Contents

Abbreviations	11
Introduction	13
Chapter 1: Early Confrontations with Others: the <i>Écrits de Jeunesse</i>	21
Peopling the Universe	24
The Exotic	28
Woman as a Sexual Partner	35
Women in the Real World	41
Women, Death and an Absurd Sensibility	48
Chapter 2: The Death of Woman and the Birth of Culture	51
The Death of Woman	52
The Birth of Culture	58
Racial Purity	63
<i>Le mélange des sangs</i>	65
Cultural Priority	67
Myths of Origin	69
The Mythical Woman	70
Chapter 3: The Man-god and Death as an Act of the Will	75
Bodies without a Soul	78
Lucidity	83
Death as an act of the Will	86
A Homosocial Death	88
The Twice-born Man	93
Absurd Man	95
Chapter 4: The Dark Continent of <i>L'Étranger</i>	101
Virility	103
Inserting <i>L'Étranger</i> into the Century	108
The Dirty Joke	118
The Dark Continent	122
Chapter 5: Mythical Women in <i>La Peste</i>	129
Myths of Origin	129
The Fatherland: A Misunderstanding	130
Beyond the Absurd	133
<i>Le roman-mythe</i>	136
Woman; that which escapes History	139
<i>Dératisation</i>	141
Passion and the Egoism of Love	145

8 *Women, Race and Origins in the Writings of Albert Camus*

<i>La Vraie Voie</i>	148
The Dialogues of Men; the Silence of Women	149
Orpheus	151
An Inclination towards the Male	157
The Maternal Stereotype	161
The Battle of the Sexes	163
The Psychology of Women, Intent on Desire and Possession	165
Love rather than Justice	166
Chapter 6: Woman, Race and the Fall of Man	169
The Politics of Envy	171
Aristocracy	174
The Gendering of Race	179
Landscapes of <i>La Chute</i> in the <i>Journaux de Voyage</i>	181
Ulysses and the Dream of Ithaca	184
Christianity and Greek Myth	187
The Fall	189
Navigation and the Opium of Sexuality	191
The Pure Space	194
The Nightmares of Colonialism	195
Hell	196
Women, on the Surface of Life	201
Mythical Women in <i>La Chute</i>	206
Redemption	207
Metamorphoses	210
Chapter 7: Sexual Topographies	215
Domestic Sexuality and Exotic Fantasy	215
The Fat White Woman	218
Sexual Tourism	220
An Orientalist Discourse	227
“La Maison mauresque”	233
Assimilation	235
A Reflection on Laghouat	238
Fetishism and the Footnoted Female	239
The Terror of the Absolute	242
“Le Renégat”: a Drama of the Flesh	245
The Loss of Boundaries	251
The New Aristocracy	261
Chapter 8: The First Man	263
The Public and Private Spheres	263
<i>Le Fils de roi</i>	272
The First Man	274
The First Murder	278
The Personal and the Political	280
The Matriarchy	284
The Patriarchal Trace	293

Contents 9

The Unnatural Son	294
The Blood of History	300
Mother Earth	305
The Dark Forces of the Soul	311
Selected Bibliography	317
Index	347

Abbreviations

Full publication details are to be found in the Bibliography. Except where indicated, all translations are my own.

<i>E</i>	<i>Essais</i> (1965 edition)
<i>TRN</i>	<i>Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles</i>
<i>CI</i>	<i>Carnets I: mai 1935–février 1942</i>
<i>C2</i>	<i>Carnets II: janvier 1942–mars 1951</i>
<i>C3</i>	<i>Carnets III: mars 1951–décembre 1959</i>
<i>CAC 3</i>	<i>Fragments d'un combat: 1938–1940</i>
<i>CAC 4</i>	“ <i>Caligula</i> ”: version de 1941, suivi de “ <i>La Poétique du premier ‘Caligula’</i> ”
<i>CAC 6</i>	<i>Albert Camus: éditorialiste à “L’Express” (mai 1955–février 1956)</i>
<i>PC</i>	<i>Le Premier Camus: suivi de “Écrits de jeunesse”</i>
<i>PH</i>	<i>Le Premier Homme</i>
<i>YW</i>	<i>Youthful Writings</i>
<i>SEN</i>	<i>Selected Essays and Notebooks</i>
<i>HD</i>	<i>A Happy Death</i>
<i>TO</i>	<i>The Outsider</i>
<i>MS</i>	<i>The Myth of Sisyphus</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>The Plague</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>The Fall</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>The Rebel</i>
<i>EK</i>	<i>Exile and the Kingdom</i>
<i>FM</i>	<i>The First Man</i>
<i>CCP</i>	<i>Caligula: Cross Purpose</i>

Introduction

In view of the many books and articles on Camus, it has become customary for writers of new studies to begin by defending yet another publication on this surely over-represented subject. I hope I will be forgiven if I decline this invitation. The main subject of this book – the treatment of women in the writings of Albert Camus – is, of course, not new at all. Rather, since the late 1960s it has been a perennial focus of articles by a number of distinguished commentators, and the occasional doctoral thesis in the US and France. With the possibly sole exception of Geraldine Montgomery's work,¹ such theses rarely become books, which are in any case few in number. During the 1990s, the only single-authored work of which I know is Anthony Rizzuto's excellent *Camus: Love and Sexuality*.² Perhaps this relative paucity is because a focus on the female characters in Camus's work is an apparently self-limiting subject. This would not arise if the subject under investigation were the treatment of men in Camus's work: indeed, that would be deemed no subject at all in its own right, as it would encompass every area of Camus's work. By the same token, my approach has been that no area is beyond the scope of this investigation.

Neither have I accepted the assumption that this logically entails an exhaustive analysis of Camus's plays, simply because this is one of the rare spaces where women actually speak. Any study of female characters must first confront the obstacle that the majority are one-dimensional, lacking reality and human complexity, and this is particularly the case in Camus's theatrical works, which were not intended as investigations of individual human complexity. Camus's conception of theatre was ideologically driven and concerned with the large scale rather than individual uniqueness; for him the great ages of tragedy coincide with seismic changes in social formations:

(L)'âge tragique semble coïncider chaque fois avec une évolution où l'homme, consciemment ou non, se détache d'une forme ancienne de civilisation et se trouve devant elle en état de rupture sans, pour autant, avoir trouvé une nouvelle forme qui le satisfasse. En 1955, nous en sommes là, il me semble. (*TRN*, 1703)

¹ *Noces pour Femme seule: le féminin et le sacré dans l'œuvre d'Albert Camus* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004).

² Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.

(T)he tragic age seems to coincide every time with an evolution where man, consciously or no, detaches himself from an old form of civilization and finds himself in a state of rupture without, for all that, having found a new form that might satisfy him. In 1955, we're at that point, it seems to me.

He was concerned to depict not the individual life but destiny itself (“le destin tout entier” (*TRN*, 1733)). The task of the actor, for Camus, was to be like an empty vessel into which is poured the artist’s vision, and this appears to have been Camus’s stance throughout his theatrical career. His equation of the theatre with sculpture carries overtones, moreover, of Nietzsche’s Apollonian artist god, the divine sculptor shaping this world and creating form from the Dionysian flesh of humanity. For Camus the greatest sculpture seeks to capture “le geste, la mine ou le regard vide qui résumeront tous les gestes et tous les regards du monde” (*E*, 660) (“the gesture, the expression, or the empty stare which will sum up all the gestures and all the stares in the world”).³

Unsurprisingly then, what he called “psychology” left him indifferent as a playwright (*TRN*, 1734) – a standpoint he had adopted as early as 1937, when he noted in his reading of Oswald Spengler the “anti-psychological” meaning of myth (*CI*, 100). While, on the one hand, this perspective stems from the author’s ideological adherences (which will be discussed in the course of this book), it also conveniently justifies the move away from attempted depictions of the interior life of others; a justification and rationalization, perhaps, of his own inability to create a character from the inside (an issue that will also be treated in the course of this book). Camus’s approach to the theatre is in fact indicative of a more general attitude; in an echo of his 1958 preface to the plays, he says in his preface to *L’Envers et l’Endroit* that in his life he has learnt less about others than about himself because “ma curiosité va plus à leur destin qu’à leurs réactions et que les destins se répètent beaucoup. J’ai appris du moins qu’ils existaient” (*E*, 10) (“I am interested more in their destiny than in their reactions, and destinies barely differ one from another. I have at least learnt that other people exist”).

It is, therefore, unsurprising that women are peripheral to the writings, and marked by a high degree of interchangeability. Although one reason for this is undoubtedly Camus’s rejection of a psychological

³ See my “Camus and the Theatre”, in Edward J. Hughes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 67-78.

dimension in his work, there is also the obvious fact that, with the apparent exception of his short story, “La Femme adultère”, the focus of his concerns lies elsewhere. In my view, the character study, or the categorization of “types” which are then analysed in isolation from their fictional context, risks an emphasis on static conceptions placed into an isolated personal sphere that does not impinge on other aspects of Camus’s work and takes no account of developments in Camus’s thinking. This study was initially oriented not by the fruitless question: “what are these female characters like?” but by the question: “What are the functions of the female stereotype?” I adopted this term from Homi Bhabha’s analysis of the colonial stereotype, because the ambivalence of which he speaks, and the implications of his analysis, are readily applicable to the situation of women, both in colonialism and beyond that arena.

The stereotype, moreover, is all too often part and parcel of the critic’s own intellectual baggage, and is to be found in the unexamined assumptions about women in general that are often brought to bear in any investigation of this subject. Psychoanalytical studies in particular return female fictional creations to their supposed originals in the Camus household in order to reconstruct a family drama where virtually all these characters are found to be incarnations of the mother: the grandmother, on the other hand, is deemed to be not a woman at all, but a substitute for the absent father. This wisdom is so widespread that it is certainly not limited to psychoanalytical studies and has become the standard approach for all who prefer to dispense with the trouble of independent thought. A more insidious effect of such acceptance of the ready-made idea is the creation of an intellectual strait-jacket that discourages a spirit of inquiry.

For me, a further starting point lies in the conviction that the treatment of women is no parochial concern, but sheds light on the writings *as a whole*, and cannot be relegated to a personal sphere on the sidelines of Camus’s thought. Although women are peripheral, the implications of such marginalisation are not. In his early journalism, for example, Camus examines a number of social problems arising from the colonial system, yet he never discusses one of the most hotly debated issues throughout the entire colonial period in Algeria, which was the condition of the indigenous woman. Such omissions shed a not insignificant light on the limitations of Camus’s concern for justice. Failures to take such inconsistencies into account are indicative of a certain blindness as far as the general significance of women in

Camus's work is concerned. At several points over the course of this book I refer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's repeated point that if women are taken seriously *as* women in any argument, then the shape of the argument itself would undergo a radical change, even a paradigm shift. All too often, the female character is overlooked, or included either as an "honorary brother", or as a "homogeneous woman" whose characteristics reflect general assumptions about women. Over the course of this book I have pointed to several examples of this exclusion or appropriation, which Spivak identifies as the sign of ideology at work. I began with an investigation of women *as* women (even these fictional creatures), and everything else in this book flows from that: women in the context of colonialism, questions surrounding assimilation, race, myth. The issues raised here are the direct consequence of my attention to the treatment of women in Camus's work. My aim is not to isolate women from the framework in which they are placed, but to consider them *as* women in that framework. This entails seeing what is there, differently; and taking account of that difference.

Considerations of ideology bring me to the subject of theory, on which I have relied at various stages in this book. Where it has seemed appropriate, I have used various theoretical insights but, just as my occasional use of Freud does not make my approach a Freudian one, neither has this investigation been determined by any theoretical stance. This book was first completed in the form of a doctoral thesis in 1997. At that time, Camus was approached, in the main, as a French writer who belonged firmly within the French tradition, and it seemed necessary then to stress his colonial roots and their impact on his thinking and writing. During its composition, I found few echoes of my own arguments in the secondary literature – a factor that perhaps explains its occasionally combative tone. I did not know it then, but 1997 also marked the beginning of a wave of reassessments in the Anglophone world of Camus as a colonial figure. Often taking their lead from Conor Cruise O'Brien and Edward Said, many of these writings did not hesitate to condemn Camus because of his colonial connections. Although I cannot defend the reasons why I did not publish this book some years ago, I am grateful that this passage of time has enabled me to revise and clarify my own distance from this constituency. While accepting Louis Althusser's general proposition that one cannot stand outside of ideology, nevertheless I have tried to avoid the self-righteous and condemnatory stances of some applica-

tions of postcolonial theory. Certainly, it would be possible, if fruitless, to “convict” Camus for some of his attitudes; ultimately, however, we can only condemn him for being a man of his own age and not ours – the purpose of such moral indignation being merely to congratulate ourselves for belonging to our own times rather than his. Perhaps because of my original sociological training, my regard for literary theory is not as high as my regard for empirical evidence, especially when that evidence disrupts a complacent intellectual consensus.

Ironically, events in Algeria itself have overtaken a number of such ideologically driven arguments. The relaxation of state censorship at the beginning of the 1990s, combined with Algerian demands to know the truth about a war whose narrative had hitherto been controlled by the Algerian state,⁴ have prompted a new wave of scholarship on the Algerian war of Independence. As Martin Evans and John Phillips have recently pointed out, the reduction of complex history to a tale “of heroes and villains” can no longer be justified.⁵ It is, moreover, an inconvenient truth that exiled Algerians themselves have increasingly embraced Camus as one of their own – as does Assia Djebar when, in *Le Blanc de l’Algérie*, she places him at the forefront of a Franco-phone Algerian literature threatened with extinction.⁶ What Emily Apter describes as a dispute between Algerian secularists and postcolonial critics over an Algerian Camus cannot so easily be dismissed as a frightened and confused response to Islamism.⁷ But if some cannot take seriously the claims of Algerians themselves, recent historical scholarship as well as the Algerian civil war is sufficient to provoke a more serious re-reading of some of Camus’s political stances.

⁴ See *El Watan*, “Trente ans d’amnésie” (5th July, 1992). See also Benjamin Stora, “Algérie: les retours de la mémoire de la guerre d’indépendance”, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 10 (4) (2002), 461-473.

⁵ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 5. See also James D. Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

⁶ Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.

⁷ “Out of character: Camus’s French Algerian subjects”, *Modern Language Notes*, 112 (4) (1997) (499-516), 501-502. Apter seems to be arguing that the “reinvention” of Camus by those “fearing for their lives” is “rooted in personal stakes”; that they “seem” to be arguing for an “indiscriminate jumble” of exiled or French-identified Algerian writers as a confused response to *intégrisme*.

Throughout his writing career Camus was aware not of “saying less” (as he wrote in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), but of saying more than he had consciously intended. His reflections on his writing show a constant awareness of this, as when he wrote in 1937 that “j’ai besoin parfois d’écrire des choses qui m’échappent en partie, mais qui précisément font la preuve de ce qui en moi est plus fort que moi” (*CI*, 60) (“Sometimes I need to write things that partly escape me, but which demonstrate precisely what in me is stronger than I am”). Twenty years later, in his preface to *L’Envers et l’Endroit*, he named such intrusions “ces forces obscures de l’âme” (“those obscure forces of the soul”), which add richness to an artist’s work, but not without being channelled and surrounded by bulwarks (“digues”) (*E*, 12). Here, the writer is reviewing the entire body of his work, recognising the battle to control and contain such forces. Reflecting that these barriers are still perhaps too high, he implies a certain lowering of these in his future work. This “obscure part”, that which says at times “more”, escaping the writer’s conscious control (but which is nevertheless written), was increasingly to dominate Camus’s thought. In 1959, when asked in his last interview which aspect of his work had been neglected, he replied: “La part obscure, ce qu’il y a d’aveugle et d’instinctif en moi” (*E*, 1925) (“The obscure part, that which is blind and instinctive in me”). Although *Le Premier Homme* remains unfinished, its last chapter clearly suggests that he was to investigate this very same “part obscure de l’être” (“obscure part of the being”), which throughout the years had stirred in him, like the waters flowing beneath the earth (*PH*, 256). While trying to avoid speculation, and to focus on what is written, the attention of this book is on these other forces in the writings of Camus. If he was consciously able to categorise and control his female characters through their marginalisation and the use of stereotypes, how might the presence of women escape him to say more than he had necessarily intended? How, moreover, can women be integrated into the body of Camus’s work? As this is my focus, it is also the reason why I have concentrated on Camus’s prose fiction. I accept the author’s own judgement that:

J’écris sur des plans différents pour éviter justement le mélange des genres. J’ai composé ainsi des pièces dans le langage de l’action, des essais à forme rationnelle, des romans sur l’obscurité du cœur. (*E*, 1926)

I write on different levels precisely to avoid the mixing of genres. Thus I have composed plays in the language of action, essays in rational form, novels on the obscurity of the heart.

This book is not about the grand ideas associated with Camus's work. It is consciously about the marginal, and that to which the least importance is usually attributed. At least if commentators on this subject are to be believed, then here is to be found the most a-political and a-social area of his work, the one that relates most closely to the personal life and emotions of the author himself. "Women" have been my starting point, and in the belief that this subject has as wide a scope as any "affaire entre hommes". From the outset, my intention has been not to judge, but to investigate these connections, and this book has been undertaken not in any spirit of condemnation, but in what I hope to be an objective spirit of inquiry. It is intended as a contribution to an ongoing debate and for this reason, to those readers who will challenge its flaws, correct, extend or overturn its arguments, this book is dedicated to you.

July 2007