

# Untimely Rewriting: Memory and Self-Censorship in Camus' *Le Premier homme*

Peter Dunwoodie

Goldsmiths – University of London  
p.dunwoodie@gold.ac.uk

*Censorship invariably generates images of repression, prohibition, and sanction, thus positioning the author as a transgressive figure, heroic or subversive, victim or villain. However, censorship does not always require an external agent. Indeed, when it takes the form of self-censorship it frequently blurs the boundaries between the writing subject and the mechanisms and agencies of repression. This paper focuses on a high-profile French example of self-censorship – Albert Camus, and the Algerian war of independence – and explores some of the mechanisms used to silence the grievances of one community in order to ground the claims of another. The central argument is that *Le Premier homme* is a political text, a process of selective remembering seeking ways of rewriting the history of French colonialism in Algeria and proposing an ethical basis for a dialogic political project.*

Keywords: literature and censorship / French literature / autobiographical novel / historical memory / Camus, Albert / self-censorship / Algeria

UDK 821.133.1.09Camus A.

I would like to frame this paper with two quotes from Albert Camus, condensed formulations of both my topic and his ethics. The first is taken from his early essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (The Myth of Sisyphus); the second from the unfinished *Le Premier homme* (The First Man, published in 1994, thirty years after his death):

A man is more a man because of what he leaves unsaid than of what he says.

...

No, a man holds himself back. That's what a man is, because otherwise ...<sup>1</sup>

## I

Albert Camus was no stranger to censorship. He was, after all, forced to leave Algeria in 1940 after months of skirmishes with the censors of the colonial government because of his overtly oppositional stance as a journalist on the trade-union supported newspapers *Alger républicain* and *Soir républicain*. He was also familiar with the censorship of wartime through his years as a journalist on the leading French underground newspaper *Combat*. It was on *Combat*, too, that he encountered – and rejected – the censorship that came with capitalist ownership. Throughout the 1950s he denounced the restrictions on freedom of speech inherent in the totalitarianisms of both Right and Left, from Spain to Hungary.

As can be seen from the title of this paper, however, this is not the aspect of Camus' output that I have chosen to examine as a case study. Instead of the public, dissemination stage of censorship in which politics, morality, fashion, and so on constrain an author's work, I focus on the workings of an earlier, more private or "precursive" stage: *self-censorship*. *Le Premier homme* – the text Camus was working on at the time of his death in January 1960 – is shown to be an instructive test case for two reasons. The first is related to issues of the socio-historical context of production; the other to the role of self-censorship in the genesis of a text. The published manuscript of *Le Premier homme* has three parts: "The Search for the Father" is based on the search for witnesses that knew the narrator's father (killed in 1914 at the Battle of the Marne), supplemented by intertextual sources on prewar Algeria, the settler generation of 1848 in particular. Part 2, "The Son," is a mixture of self-contained chapters on family life, childhood games, schooling, and so on, and an account of the narrator's progress, in the present of the narration, towards self-awareness as "the first man." Part 3 is an Appendix of notes, references, and reflections that suggest something of the raw material used and the multiple directions in which the novel might have developed. As it stands, the unfinished text is more autobiographical than fictional, and it is primarily from this angle that the issue of self-censorship is addressed.

My objective is to briefly look at the interplay between journalist and novelist. Looking first at issues around the political context, I specifically seek to show how, in working throughout the 1950s on this account of French colonialism in Algeria, Camus was actually seeking to circumvent through literature a position he had publicly committed himself to after 1956 regarding the war launched in 1954 to bring that colonization to an end.

As is widely known, Camus' involvement in Algerian politics began long before 1954; his most famous attack on government policies ap-

peared in 1939 as a series of newspaper articles entitled “Misère de la Kabylie.” In fact, starting in 1945 he became France’s most high-profile spokesman in favor of a just, liberal colonialism, and if he always felt ill-at-ease in Paris cultural circles, it was largely because he valorized his “colonial” identity above all. This identity constituted the motivating force behind a journalistic stance on matters Algerian grounded in the authority of the insider and designed to inform, correct, and reshape metropolitan French views. A single example, taken from one of his regular articles in the pages of the liberal magazine *L'Express* in 1955, illustrates the position and the rhetoric: “To judge by some newspapers,” Camus wrote, “one really gets the impression that Algeria is populated by a million settlers wielding riding crops and cigars, and driving around in Cadillacs.”<sup>2</sup>

A widespread misconception, he argued, but a politically convenient one because it shifted historical responsibility away from metropolitan France:

They were born over there, they will die there, and all they ask is that it should not be in terror or threats, not massacred at the bottom of their coalmines. Is it really necessary for these hardworking Frenchmen, cut off in the countryside and villages, to be handed over to be massacred in order to expiate the multiple sins of colonial France?<sup>3</sup>

The oppositional position is manifest. However, the validity of the authority on which it is based would require further examination. Is it grounded in the status of a colonial insider, as Camus clearly felt, or as an internationally renowned writer with a reputation as a humanist? Moreover, is it sufficient to counter what J. S. Mill called the “social tyranny of the doxa?” Is it sufficient to validate the author’s agenda, and render it persuasive? Part of the answer can be found in a manuscript note from 1957, written shortly after Camus terminated his collaboration with *L'Express*: “I have decided to remain silent about Algeria in order to avoid adding either to its misfortunes or to the nonsense written about it.”<sup>4</sup>

This silencing, a radical self-censorship in which Camus relinquished the right to intervene in the public arena (via an authority greatly magnified by receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957), shows that the lesson was not getting through. Indeed, it was embroiled in misreadings that were publicly adding to the problem. The moral position implicit here, vis-à-vis what can and cannot be written in an inflammatory situation, immediately raises questions about a text like *Le Premier homme*. If overt political intervention was banned, then turning to an autobiographically-based novel on precisely the same issues would have to be interpreted as the transposition into literature of what was, otherwise, to remain publicly

unsaid. It could function, in other words, both as an alternative (covert) means of transmission of an authorial position, and as an arena in which the oversimplifications inherent in political or journalistic writing could be overcome. In silencing his journalistic voice, it could be argued, Camus resorts to fictionalized autobiography as a vehicle for his emotive, personal identification with, and support for, the European community and their claim to belong in French Algeria.

There is thus clear evidence to suggest that one of his aims in *Le Premier homme* was to transpose the pedagogical impetus behind his journalism, to give concrete examples of what a newspaper article could merely *assert*, thus constructing a writer-reader complicity that would circumvent the self-imposed silence. In so doing, literature – especially in the emotive autobiographical form adopted here – could be thought to escape the stranglehold of overt political allegiance. This allegiance was most publicly acknowledged in the press,<sup>5</sup> and most effectively circumvented by exploiting fiction's ability to articulate the paradoxes – and the heteroglossia – that rational argument or political persuasion seek to eradicate.

However, Camus' private correspondence reveals that the self-censorship actually had another, more fundamental motive. In a letter to a friend of many years (Jean Grenier), and following the 1958 publication of his collected writings on Algeria, published as *Chroniques algériennes* (Algerian Chronicles), Camus admitted that:

Like you, I think it's probably too late for Algeria. I didn't say so in my book ... because you have to leave room for historical chance – and because you don't write to say that it's all finished. In cases like that, you remain silent. That's what I'm getting ready to do.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas *Le Premier homme* clearly constitutes an emotive defense of the European community, the nostalgic tone of much of the autobiographical material can be interpreted as an indicator of Camus' private acknowledgement of defeat. The retreat to a personal register makes the narrator's quest for (and final loss of) the father an allegory of the incipient work of mourning at the "loss" of Algeria, referred to in the letter to Grenier. Indeed, behind this figure of acknowledged failure lies a more fundamental loss: behind the male, conceived in terms of what he does, thus embodying the colony as a site of action, lies the figure of the mother, the primal site, figuring Algeria as source of being. Disturbingly absent in the fullness of her presence – ahistorical, illiterate, monosyllabic – she inhabits the silent center of the book as the unattainable source. Camus frequently declared that he would not accept

any political solution for Algeria that would “uproot” him and make of him a foreigner in his own motherland. Yet the Appendix to *Le Premier homme* reveals that it was to be written in full consciousness that this was, indeed, already the case, when he notes that: “It should be *simultaneously* the story of the end of a world – interspersed with regret for [those] years of light” (282).<sup>7</sup>

The anguish that permeates the text, and that contrasts with the happy childhood episodes recounted (of schooling, games etc.), remains unexplored, an area of intense affective investment pointing to the realization that belonging was always more something desired than something achieved, that the autobiography is tentatively sounding out a paradise always already out of reach (the *paradis perdu* of his early writings). The mother figures both the source that words cannot attain (319) and another mode of being, outside History (with a capital *H*) and incorporating the immanence of origin. The narrator signals the shift from one to the other in a single sentence: “When, beside his father’s grave, he feels time break up – this new temporal framework is that of the book” (217).<sup>8</sup>

## II

This leads to the role of self-censorship in the genesis of the text. In order to ground that claim to roots, Camus’ novel about the European community could not avoid erasure and, in particular, the *disavowal* of the historical violence of colonial occupation. In adopting an autobiographical approach, he seeks to justify such erasure by anchoring the narration in the pathos of family allegiance – despite the frequent resurfacing of violence via the “terrorists” of the 1950s, the “bandits” of everyday colonial life, or the “hostility” of the Arabs of 1848 (174). Camus notes repeatedly that he is portraying and, to the extent that his intellectual background will allow (180–2), identifying with only part of the European community, the “innocent civilians” in whose name he launched a highly mediatized “Appeal for a Civil Truce” in 1956. This community was to be defended against the facile globalizing labels and tendentious oversimplifications that were shaping French public opinion, and that his journalism had challenged.<sup>9</sup> This is the community that, in public declarations and published texts before 1957, he identified as “my mother and all my family/community” (*ma mère et tous les miens*).

The unfinished novel can thus be seen as an oblique way of *re-engaging* with politics by shifting the ground on which opposing world views

are envisaged, while openly challenging the abstractions that politics engenders (abstractions such as “colonization,” “settler,” “terrorist,” etc.). This is accomplished by avoiding a direct confrontation with the political, favoring instead (i) the personal, (ii) a humanist ethic, and (iii) a rhetoric of nostalgia. What the text does not do, however, is openly articulate the bitter truth that Camus had also left unsaid in the contemporaneous collection of *Chroniques algériennes*: that, as far as future developments could be foreseen, it was already “too late for Algeria.” In the face of this self-censorship – one might even say in conscious denial of the inescapability of what has been censored – *Le Premier homme* is, on the contrary, a fervent plea for an alternative perspective, ahistorical, indeed mythical. This would be based not on memory of the injustices of the *past*, on politics and history, but on an existential notion of belonging, ground for a *project* that would allow the European community and the Muslim majority to coexist harmoniously. The selective portrait thus fulfilled a dual role: first, to dissociate the “poor Whites” [*petits blancs*] from the (history of the) so-called abuses of colonial power; and, second, via poverty and powerlessness, to associate them with the Muslim masses. To effect this reconfiguration, Camus chooses to foreground the memory of working people [*petites gens*] that have themselves never been the agents of History— who, indeed, from Camus’ viewpoint, have always been its victims.<sup>10</sup> Hence the central focus on the subjective, as ground for a new ethics, the foregrounding of the individual and the contingent, not the structured or historical. Hence, also, the privileging of atomized narratives, as opposed to a culture’s “grand narrative.” Finally, the focus also has an intertextual impact: as the Appendix reveals, Camus was sourcing his historical material on French settlement not on works written from the critical distance of the historian, but primarily on direct experience via the memoirs of a settler that arrived as a child in 1848. This text, recorded by a journalist turned writer, Maxime Rasteil, and entitled *A l’Aube de l’Algérie française. Le Calvaire des colons de 48 (The Dawn of French Algeria. The Calvary of the Settlers of ‘48)*, chronicles the sufferings and labor of the modest migrants of 1848.

While there is, thus, no direct engagement with History, the partial accounts of modest lives provide the alternative, the stark materiality of subjective, lived experience. In the Appendix, Camus notes the “absence of archives” marking France’s political, economic, and administrative reorganization of Algeria (268). This is a significant absence, I would argue, which constitutes the precondition for his own text, allowing *Le Premier homme* to function – in the middle of a political and human crisis – as supplement. Indeed, the novel was to explicitly be a monument to an endan-

gered and, above all, historically guiltless, community. However, like all monuments and other sites of memory, it tells only part of the story.

### III

In censoring the traditionally “historical,” in focusing exclusively on the lived experience of (auto)biography, Camus guarantees the performativity of a work that acknowledges only its status as a work of memory in (and, obliquely, a work of mourning for) a community deprived of the means of, the desire for, self-representation. He makes of the community, in short, a collective figure similar to what Giorgio Agamben has called the “superstes” or witness-survivor (*Homo sacer*, 1995) – including the implicit bias therein regarding veracity and sincerity. Moreover, because the recovery of memories is always partial and unstable – like the rhetoric of uncertainty, incompleteness, and, ultimately, frustration through which it is articulated – it is concretized in the narrative atomization referred to above, embodied in the indefinite traces and fragmentary evidence available when excavating the past of a “people without memory” (*peuple sans mémoire*, 97).<sup>11</sup>

By taking the dignity of the poverty of a working-class family whose key objective is said to be not acquisition but survival,<sup>12</sup> and privileging it as a central topos, Camus’ text can sidestep the colonial ethos of acquisition and productive destruction, the issue of capitalist exploitation, and the process historically central thereto, expropriation. He makes them, at best, actions of a capitalist minority,<sup>13</sup> focusing instead on deprivation and a labor power exploited by others. Moreover, by avoiding the positive gloss normally put on such operations, namely the “benefits of colonization” in the name of progress, Camus not only sidesteps the doxa of the day but avoids a teleological interpretation in which the working class would play a necessary role and, problematically, bear a historical responsibility. He instead foregrounds immediate experience, a local, small-scale history of those he called in the 1940s “l’homme réel, l’homme de tous les jours, l’homme concret” (the real, everyday, concrete individual).<sup>14</sup>

One cannot, of course, say how *Le Premier homme* would have developed. What is known, however, is that Camus was fully aware of the politics of the colonial situation. Indeed, in a *Combat* article of October 1944 he was much less discrete and openly denounced the right-wing ideology of Algeria’s European community. This denunciation, unlike *Le Premier homme*, makes no special claim to disculpate the working-class:

It would be silly, it's true, to leave the country unaware that the [French population of North Africa] largely supported Vichy's policies, and that it supported them for the same reasons that it was opposed to any policy that would free the native population. What is called over there, rightly or wrongly, the colonial mentality, has always held out against innovation, even when called for by the most elementary justice.<sup>15</sup>

*Combat* thus points to the key unsaid a decade later, in *Le Premier homme*, where references to "poor White" racism have to be countered in order to promote a humanist alternative. Hence, no doubt, the anger generated in the hero when, during a stilted exchange on terrorism, his Arab friend claims that a mother could share a collective guilt, while the narrator aggressively asserts that innocent individuals exist (277). The *possibility of innocence* is, indeed, a key issue in the book, and a motivating force behind the choices that Camus was making. It drives, in particular, the leitmotif of confession that dominates the Appendix (see for instance 311, 317, 319). However, innocence would be impossible, and confession unnecessary, without repression. The lingering guilt that marks this repression haunts *Le Premier homme*, a portrait of what Camus called Algeria's "uneasy conquerors."

The main issue to be negotiated in *Le Premier homme* was indeed historical responsibility and individual innocence. While Camus notes that his objective was to "save this poor family from the destiny of the poor which is to disappear from history without leaving any trace" (293),<sup>16</sup> the text reveals that memory was to have a dual function in this negotiation. Vis-à-vis "his mother and his family," at the autobiographical level, its function was one of retrieval, the conscious unearthing and piecing together of memorial fragments that, the narrator finally has to acknowledge, remain permanently incomplete. At the collective level, on the other hand, in resurrecting a portrait of Algeria's Europeans, remembering no longer plays a heuristic role. On the contrary, instrumentalized memory guarantees only that Algeria's communities will remain locked in constantly reworked past antagonisms. However, the work of memory, as psychoanalytic practice has long illustrated, is also to forget. While forgetting can be the result of self-censorship, obviously, it is also an essential constituent of memory, as a philosopher like Paul Ricœur has reminded us. Just as it is, obviously, a precondition for the work of memory and the healing process.<sup>17</sup>

Let me conclude, then, with a brief general comment arising from this case study of a text left incomplete in the midst of the movement for decolonization. *Le Premier homme* shows that self-censorship is not necessarily negatively connoted, and that the opposition thereto is not automati-



cally linked to something “truer,” as well-established prejudice might lead one to believe. It can, as I propose here, be the necessary prerequisite for a politically and ethically viable future – something exemplified particularly well in a Truth and Reconciliation Commission like that of South Africa. That Camus should have understood the necessity for such a process in the middle of the Franco-Algerian war is testament to a philosophy that, he liked to assert, left him pessimistic about History but optimistic about the human Subject. In seeking to undermine the doxa defended by the Ultras of both France and Algeria, he sought to demonstrate that the individual’s freedom not only remains intact – that there was no historical inevitability at work in this crisis – but that it can at such times be best embodied in “saying less.” The relevance of *Le Premier homme* for this conference, I feel, lies in confronting the implications of that freely imposed self-censorship.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Un homme est plus un homme par les choses qu’il tait que par celles qu’il dit.” ... “Non, un homme ça s’empêche. Voilà ce que c’est un homme, ou sinon ...” All English translations are the author’s.

<sup>2</sup> “A lire une certaine presse, il semblerait vraiment que l’Algérie soit peuplée d’un million de colons à cravache et cigare, montées sur Cadillac.”

<sup>3</sup> “Ils sont nés la-bas, ils y mourront, et voudraient seulement que ce ne soit pas dans la terreur ou la menace, ni massacrés au fond de leurs mines. Faut-il donc que ces Français laborieux, isolés dans leur bled et leurs villages, soient offerts au massacre pour expier les immenses péchés de la France colonisatrice?” (*L’Express*, 21 Oct. 1955).

<sup>4</sup> “J’ai décidé de me taire en ce qui concerne l’Algérie, afin de n’ajouter ni à son malheur ni aux bêtises qu’on écrit à son propos;” quoted by Roger Quilliot in *Cahiers Albert Camus* (195). That the second reason for resorting to self-censorship contradicts the overt pedagogical role assigned to Camus’ writings on Algeria is, no doubt, a sign of the dilemma to which he had been reduced. One of the best-known censored texts of the period, Henri Alleg’s *La Question* (which denounced the torture he had undergone at the hands of French paratroopers) was published in Paris the same year by Maspero.

<sup>5</sup> A text by an author as outspoken as Bernard Noël provides an example of events in Paris at the time: “Je suis dans un meeting pour la liberté de la presse, salle Wagram, en 1956. Les fascistes attaquent. Algérie française. Bombes lacrymogènes. On casse des chaises. On tape sur des têtes. Traînées de sang. L’Algérie française est jetée dehors. Tout est calme soudain dans la fumée, la toux, les pleurs. La police entre. La police qui devait nous protéger. La foule se lève et peu à peu recule contre un des murs. Gendarmes mobiles et gardiens de la paix emplissent tout l’espace qui se libère. Silence. Devant moi, face à face, un gardien de la paix. Tout à coup, flics et gendarmes crient. Les crosses et les bâtons se lèvent. Je tombe, frappé en travers du front;” *L’Outrage aux mots*, published in Noël’s denunciation of the Algerian War, *Le Château de Cène* (154); censored in 1973 for “outrage aux mœurs.”

<sup>6</sup> “Je crois comme vous qu’il est sans doute trop tard pour l’Algérie. Je ne l’ai pas dit dans mon livre parce que “lo peor no es siempre seguro” (sic) – parce qu’il faut laisser ses

chances au hasard historique – et parce qu'on n'écrit pas pour dire tout est fichu. Dans ce cas-là, on se tait. Je m'y prépare;" Albert Camus and Jean Grenier, *Correspondance* (222).

<sup>7</sup> "Ce devrait être *en même temps* [original stress] l'histoire de la fin d'un monde – traversé de regret [des] années de lumière ..."

<sup>8</sup> "Quand, près de la tombe de son père, il sent le temps se disloquer – ce nouvel ordre du temps est celui du livre."

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Camus' rejection of any public action "qui pourrait donner bonne conscience par des déclarations sans risque pour moi, au fanatique stupide qui tirera à Alger sur une foule où se trouveraient ma mère et tous les miens" (*Cahiers Albert Camus*, 196).

<sup>10</sup> This argument is also central to *Chroniques algériennes*, in which Camus talks of "les hommes de (s)a famille qui, de surcroît, étant pauvres et sans haine, n'ont jamais exploité ni opprimé personne" (897).

<sup>11</sup> See also the key acknowledgement: "Vieux cimetière des colons, l'immense oublié" (303). In the text this term is used to typify the entire settler community: "l'immense oublié qui était la patrie définitive des hommes de sa race, le lieu d'aboutissement d'une vie commencée sans racines. ... Comme si l'histoire des hommes ... s'évaporerait sous le soleil incessant avec le souvenir de ceux qui l'avaient vraiment faite" (179–81).

<sup>12</sup> This position is made explicit when Camus draws a distinction between the situations in Hungary and Algeria (he was frequently attacked as less "committed" to dissidence in the case of Algeria): "Il n'y avait pas en Hongrie, installés depuis plus d'un siècle, plus d'un million de Russes (dont 80% de petites gens) que l'insurrection hongroise eût menacés dans leur vie et dans leurs droits et pas seulement dans leurs privilèges. ... Le problème algérien se pose autrement: il faut assurer la liberté des deux peuplements" (*Cahiers Albert Camus*, 197).

<sup>13</sup> What is being argued here is grounded in a distinction neatly drawn by Jean Ricardou in "La Révolution textuelle:" "Penser en termes d'expression, c'est établir un dispositif dans lequel on ne songe pas immédiatement qu'il puisse y avoir censure: c'est à ce qui est dit, d'abord, que l'on s'intéresse. Penser en termes de sélection, en revanche, c'est établir un dispositif dans lequel on pense qu'il y a nécessairement censure: ce qui n'est pas choisi est refusé, recalé, exclu, censuré" (930).

<sup>14</sup> "Intervention à la Table Ronde de 'Civilisation,'" *Œuvres complètes II* 679.

<sup>15</sup> *Œuvres complètes II* 544. "Il serait stupide, en effet, de laisser ignorer au pays que [la population française d'Afrique du Nord] était acquise en grande partie à la politique de Vichy. Et qu'elle lui était acquise pour les raisons justement qui faisaient qu'elle était opposée à toute politique d'affranchissement du peuple indigène. Ce qu'on appelle là-bas, à tort ou à raison, l'esprit colon, s'est toujours dressé contre toute innovation, même demandée par la justice la plus élémentaire."

<sup>16</sup> "Arracher cette famille pauvre au destin des pauvres qui est de disparaître de l'histoire sans laisser de traces."

<sup>17</sup> *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*.

## WORKS CITED

- Camus, Albert. *Cahiers Albert Camus* (6). Paris: Gallimard, 1987.  
---. *Chroniques algériennes, Actuelles III*. Paris: Gallimard, 2002.  
---. *Le Premier homme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.  
---. *Œuvres complètes II (1944–1948)*. Paris: Gallimard, 2006.  
Camus, Albert, and Jean Grenier. *Correspondance 1932–1960*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.

Dunwoodie, Peter. *Writing French Algeria*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.

Dunwoodie, Peter, and E. J. Hughes (eds.). *Constructing Memories. Camus, Algeria and the "Premier homme."* Stirling: Stirling University Press, 1998.

Noël, Bernard. *Le Château de Cène*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.

Ricardou, Jean. "La Révolution textuelle." *Esprit* 12 (1972): 927–45.

Ricoeur, Paul. *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000.