

Where's Beauvoir?

Review of

The Boxer and the Goalkeeper, by Andy Martin

Times Literary Supplement – 14 December 2012 – p. 26

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Penultimate draft. Please cite only published version.

Happiness, observed John Stuart Mill, is not something you can achieve by striving for it. You have to pursue some other goal, and 'if otherwise fortunately circumstanced you will inhale happiness with the air you breathe'. Something similar can be said of cool. Trying to be cool is deeply uncool. But if you dedicate your efforts to some other goal, and if the goal and your efforts are admirable, then you will exhale cool with the air you breathe.

Andy Martin presents Albert Camus as the epitome of 'degree zero' laid-back cool, with Jean-Paul Sartre as the very opposite. The placid goalkeeper and the frenetic boxer. 'Why are you trying so hard?', Camus asked Sartre one evening. There are places where it is tempting to ask the same of this book. The opening chapters mix biography and textual exposition with personal memoir, random observation, and outright fantasy, occasionally overlaying them. This is kinda funky, but does seem somewhat awkwardly, self-consciously so.

Fortunately, the book soon relaxes into a more assured style, allowing the story to structure the prose. And what a story it is. What begins as a meeting of minds under the occupation develops through an absurd episode in the liberation and on to a very public fight about the political role of violence. Martin traces this story through original and insightful analyses of the literary and philosophical works that made Camus and Sartre famous, in parallel with the competitive nature of their more earthly activities. This context allows some stylised passages, including a play and a synoptic presentation of our heroes arguing without mentioning one another's names, to stand out as enjoyable and well accomplished.

The political philosophies of Camus and Sartre, as Martin presents them, are incrementally defined by the debate between them, as though each thinker's overriding aim is to disagree with the other. Emphasising this dialectical relationship has meant pushing other influences on the two thinkers deep into the background. This can be justified as a means of exposition, so long as it does not significantly distort the theories being presented. But there is one person whose role in the development of the philosophies of these two men seems as important as their influence on one another. Simone de Beauvoir is curiously absent from the intellectual plot of this book.

She is not absent from the book altogether. Martin presents interesting thoughts on her novel *She Came To Stay*. Beauvoir voices the occasional philosophical criticism of each of our heroes. But her central role in the story is social, in part to add sexual tension. 'Three pigs, three bears, the trinity, the triad' is how the social story starts out, before it becomes explicitly two against one. The intellectual story, by contrast, is always the two men boxing, a 'binary praxis of antagonistic reciprocity'. Intellectually, in this telling, Beauvoir shifts from sideline critic to Sartre's henchwoman. She is never an independent and equal party in the discussion. Given the originality and sophistication of her own moral and political writings at the time, a more considered analysis of her influence on each of the two men might well present a rather different picture of their philosophies as well as of hers.

For the dialectic between the two men does not really seem to explain their resulting positions. 'I am more intelligent than you', Sartre tells Camus early on. Martin makes it clear that this view of Camus comes to be embodied in Sartre's criticisms of his work as well as their social rivalry. Sartre is presented as finding Camus unrelentingly superficial. He thinks Camus ignores, wilfully or otherwise, the deeper currents of history and the more significant structures of political arrangement. He accuses Camus not of giving the wrong answers to the difficult questions of the day, but rather of failing to address those questions altogether, indeed failing to realise what they even are. If this is a fair representation of Sartre's view of Camus, then the details of the two men's political philosophies cannot have been shaped very much by their disagreement, for ultimately these details are not contrary answers to the same questions.

Sartre's perception of Camus as superficial might also explain why he never matches his rival's lean, elegant prose. Sartre generally says far too much, sometimes nowhere near enough. The closest he comes to Camusian concision is his autobiographical *Words*, for which he awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature seven years after Camus. This achievement suggests that we should take seriously his claim that he was not generally interested in style. It is not that he could not do it, but that he would not waste his time on what he considered a triviality.

Perhaps indeed the same can be said of the personal contrast between the two men. Martin tells us that Camus was perpetually fretting in private over strategies for maintaining his public chic and charm. He seems to have honed his image as obsessively as he honed his prose, working very hard beneath the placid surface. At the same time, he viewed his older rival as someone who did not know how to be cool. But given Sartre's antipathy to concerns about surface image, it looks rather as though he simply didn't give a damn about looking cool. And isn't that, in the end, far cooler?