

A MARXIST MURDERER

The anguished autobiography of Louis Althusser, Marxist philosopher and intellectual godfather to the generation of 1968, was recently published in France – two years after his death, and 12 years after he strangled his wife H el ene. EDWARD FOX reports on a literary sensation, and on France’s nostalgia for a lost age of academic heroes



Above: H el ene Rytman, Althusser’s wife, 1957

Right: Louis Althusser in Paris, 1978

The French literary world has observed with fascination and dismay in recent weeks the success of an unlikely bestseller: the posthumously published autobiography of the philosopher Louis Althusser, who died in 1990. *L’avenir dure longtemps* (The Future Lasts a Long Time) has sold nearly 40,000 copies since it was published in April. A two-part documentary on Althusser’s life was shown last month on the television channel FR3; an accompanying biography has also been selling well.

The autobiography’s success is certainly due to the fact that in 1980 Althusser murdered his wife, and that the book, written five years later, presents a dramatic account of this act and the madness that led to it. But more than this, *l’affaire Althusser* has struck a national nerve, awakening a nostalgia for the Sixties, and for a lost generation of intellectual superstars. “He was the last revolutionary,” laments a friend, the author Elisabeth Roudinesco, “the last thinker in France who made us think revolution was possible.”

The opening pages of Althusser’s book describe the murder scene in lurid detail: on a dismal November dawn in their flat in the  cole Normale Sup erieure in Paris, Althusser finds himself one moment massaging the neck of his wife, H el ene Rytman, the next moment seeing her splayed out on his bed with the tip of her tongue protruding between her lips. That both are wearing dressing gowns and that the murder takes place against the backdrop of a frayed crimson curtain gives the description a bizarre theatrical air: it is the first sign that the book is itself an act of madness. Having strangled his wife, Althusser runs across the courtyard of the  cole Normale (a building the size of a small Cambridge college), screaming “I have killed H el ene” and pounds on the door of the college doctor, who returns to the flat, examines H el ene, and announces, “It is too late.” Her larynx was broken, but there were no marks on her neck, her clothing

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revealed no sign of struggle, and nor were any screams heard. Althusser was immediately sedated and hospitalised. He was 62; H el ene was ten years older.

For the next ten years, Althusser lived like a phantom, drugged, hospitalised and helpless. When he died in October 1990, many people were surprised to learn that he hadn't died years before. He was never arrested or tried. On 23 January 1981, a judge ruled that Althusser was unfit to plead. On the evidence of three court-appointed psychiatrists who concluded that he was in a state of dementia at the time of the killing, Althusser was granted a *non-lieu* – literally, "no grounds" for trial. Public opinion was dismayed that Althusser's eminence seemed to have saved him from prison. The ruling stripped him of legal existence and all records of the case were closed, putting the philosopher into a legal limbo in which he was neither a convict nor at liberty. The *non-lieu* condemned Althusser to death-in-life, deprived of the right to act on his own behalf, even, he claimed, "to sign my own name".

Althusser was the intellectual father of the generation of French intelligentsia, now in their forties and fifties, who came of age in the political ferment that crystallised in May 1968, when Paris students and striking workers pushed the country to what, for a moment, seemed like the brink of revolution. His philosophy was their theoretical weapon. When the graffiti-writers scrawled *  quoi sert Althusser?* (What use is Althusser?) on the walls of the Latin Quarter, Althusser's more thoughtful disciples could reply that he was at work on a future revolution's theoretical core, like Marx sitting out the revolutions of 1848 in the reading room of the British Museum.

Althusser was the product of a post-War temper when, as Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in 1964, "our epoch obliged all men of letters to do a dissertation on French politics". A large proportion of these men of letters were either in the French Communist Party, the PCF, or in sympathy with it: the PCF acquired great prestige as a result of its r ole in the Resistance. In 1945, a quarter of the French electorate supported the PCF. Althusser's own allegiance to the Party began during his wartime confinement in a Nazi prison camp and lasted (though by the Seventies – to the discomfort of its leadership – he had become its severest internal critic) until the murder obliged him to withdraw from the world.

Althusser's contribution to this tradition of radicalism was a philosophy based on a

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principle of pure faith in Marx's idea of class struggle, which he used as a starting point for a formal elaboration of the philosophical assumptions he saw underlying Marx's work. Althusser replaced a humanistic, idealistic view of the world with one that was impersonal, complex and opaque. It was intentionally incomplete, because it was always evolving.

His philosophy was class struggle without Marx's emphasis on economics. Because of the sophistication Althusser brought to Marxist thought, "he made it possible to be politically Marxist and philosophically modernist at the same time", says Gregory Elliott, the author of a study of Althusser.

The mid-Sixties marked the zenith of the "myth of Althusser". Although his name was included in the pantheon of *grands maîtres* of structuralism – with Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault – he had a particular mystique: unlike other prominent French intellectuals, he avoided the celebrity status that comes from involvement with the media. He was the opposite of a figure like Sartre, who would hold court daily in the Café des Deux Magots, and whose life was turned into a Hollywood film. Moreover, Althusser's reputation was based on only two books, *Pour Marx* (For Marx) and *Lire Capital* (Reading Capital), both published in 1965. The less visible he was, the greater his prestige, "like laquerwork which looks best in dark rooms", in the words of his biographer, Yann Moulier Boutang. Until the late Seventies, when his best work was behind him, few people had even seen a photograph of him.

Althusser was born in Algeria in 1918, the son of a bank manager. His later reputation for invisibility was a reflection of an identity crisis that began in childhood and haunted him all his life. His mother had been in love with a young man named Louis, who had gone to war and been killed in an aeroplane in 1917 over Verdun. As a morbid act of compensation, she married Louis' brother, Charles, and gave their son the name Louis. Althusser grew up thinking of himself as a substitute for the dead aviator. Even his name, Louis, sounded like *lui*, the French word meaning him, so that when one called "Louis!" one was actually referring to somebody else. To try to please his mother, and to convince her that he existed in his own right, he studied hard and excelled, eventually winning a place at the prestigious École Normale in Paris. His wartime confinement delayed his enrollment, but in 1947 he entered the school and stayed there.

For more than 30 years Althusser taught

philosophy at the École Normale. As an institution it has a status higher than a university, and has traditionally produced the nation's élite: its bishops and presidents. According to the myth of the École Normale, everyone is brilliant, ambitious and intellectually serious. Students have the status of civil servants and graduate legally qualified as teachers.

Here Althusser became the mother hen to the generations of students who passed through. Self-effacing and accessible, he looked and acted the part of a kindly grandfather, with his pipe and sad, baggy eyes. The door of the flat he shared with Hélène on the ground floor of the École Normale was always open. The school was his refuge and only home, and his multitude of students and friends – particularly since he and Hélène had no children of their own – were his extended family. He called the École the "amniotic fluid" that made his life possible. Within it gestated both the myth and the madness of Althusser.

Although Althusser was popular and successful as a professor, few could understand his long, tempestuous relationship with Hélène, a small, thin, intense woman with vaguely Asiatic features and a violent temperament. She had been active in the Resistance during the War, was an ardent Communist, and later had a career as a sociological fieldworker. She was the product of a nightmarish childhood, and Althusser always felt the need to protect her. Yet he also confesses that he habitually subjected her to appalling bouts of emotional cruelty. She was forced to become virtually complicit in satisfying his appetite for a succession of young mistresses. ("One night," he writes in *L'avenir*, "we were at dinner with a couple we hadn't known long... I stood up during the meal and, with much oratory, insisted to the beautiful young woman opposite me that we could and must make love on the table there and then in front of everyone.") Hélène, for her part, both loved and hated him. "She was mad too," Elisabeth Roudinesco says. They were both the knife and the wound of each other.

"They had an extraordinary genius for making life difficult for themselves," recalls Pierre Macherey, a student and friend of the couple. "Everything in daily life was a problem, everything was complicated. They couldn't buy an article of clothing without arguments." Régis Debray, one of Althusser's students and a key Sixties radical, includes a moving portrait of Althusser and Hélène in his 1983 novel *Les Masques*: "In appearance, there was nothing in common between this inseparable pair who couldn't stand each other, and who

shared the same psychoanalyst: he, the libertine cardinal, the aristocratic communist... who liked good food and old Bordeaux; she, militant and surly, with a cracked voice and no sense of humour, in a raincoat and black beret, very Forties."

The three psychiatrists who judged Althusser to be in a state of dementia at the time of the killing of Hélène also revealed publicly what had long been known at the École Normale and among Althusser's friends: that Althusser had lived for years with a manic-depressive psychosis, and that the condition required him to take regular periods of leave for treatment in hospital. There were occasional glimpses of what lay behind the façade: the British historian Douglas Johnson recalls Althusser stopping someone in the corridor of the École Normale and confiding that he "had lost all sense of identity".

Nevertheless, for 30 years, in addition to writing books and taking part in political affairs, Althusser taught philosophy to thousands of students and was the equivalent at the École Normale of the head of the humanities department. He kept meticulous notebooks on administrative matters. Because he could cope with his work, his absences were overlooked. The invisibility of Althusser, so important to his mystique, was caused by the regular withdrawal from view demanded by his condition. Another answer to the question *À quoi sert Althusser?* – who was conspicuous by his silence in May 1968 – was that he was in hospital throughout that period.

All his writing and political interventions took place in the energetic manic phase of the manic-depressive cycle. This was followed by a depression that took him out of action. But the manic phases were increasingly signposted by outrageous acts as he got older. To Hélène's alarm, he once plotted to hijack an atomic submarine, another time to rob a bank. Later, he bought a piano, although he couldn't play, and would subject friends to appalling improvisations. After Hélène's death, and despite the *non-lieu*, he managed to buy a flashy Italian car, a Lancia, and although he couldn't drive he propelled it through the streets of Paris from one collision to the next.

His condition was impossible to cure, and barely possible to treat. He underwent psychoanalysis, but how do you psychoanalyse someone who knows Freud backwards, and who likes to have the last word on matters of psychoanalytic practice? Althusser had been an apostle of the elaborate psychoanalytical theories of his friend Jacques Lacan, but

chose for himself an analyst who had broken with Lacan. And while undergoing the "talking cure" of classical Freudian psychoanalysis, he was being treated by the same doctor with drugs that numb the mind, making life tolerable but coherent speech almost impossible. Moreover, the same analyst also analysed Hélène, a practice that is frowned on at best. In this case it was, according to Elisabeth Roudinesco, a historian of psychoanalysis, as if Oedipus and his mother had had the same psychiatrist. And besides, she says, "Great geniuses are unanalysable."

The murder took place at a point in Althusser's life when everything he had struggled for seemed to lie in ruins. His own best work was behind him. Three years earlier, the PCF had lost the faith of many French intellectuals when it abandoned its policy of union with the other parties of the Left – including Mitterrand's Socialists. This event marked the end of Althusser's project of reviving Marxist thought. He wrote to an old friend, "My universe of thought has been abolished. I can no longer think." He was 62, and approaching retirement age. After more than 30 years in the "amniotic fluid" of the École Normale, he was frightened of what lay in store for him outside its protective walls. Besides that, the manic-depressive illness that had burdened him for years was increasing in intensity.

The year 1980 was a bad one in French intellectual history. Besides Althusser's tragedy, Roland Barthes was hit by a lorry and killed, and Lacan's École Freudienne de Paris, the medium through which his ideas were spread, collapsed. Althusser had attempted a "revolutionary intervention" at the school's final meeting, at which Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's son-in-law, attempted to seize control of the school in the presence of a now old, senile Lacan, who was unable to speak. Althusser burst into the room to defend his old friend against the conspirators, claiming he was there "on the authority of the libido and the holy spirit". It was a mad, tragic gesture.

After yet another phase of treatment in the summer of 1980, Althusser returned home to the flat in the École Normale. He was full of drugs, and the perennial conflict with Hélène resumed with a new intensity. This time, he writes, Hélène announced herself to be in such despair that she had begun to plan to kill herself.

Althusser writes in his autobiography that the two of them remained incommunicado inside the flat, ignoring the telephone, letters and the doorbell, but friends see this

as part of a fantasy Althusser concocted in his madness. Later in the book, contradicting the description that opens it, he writes that he had no memory of the killing of Hélène, yet he hints that he was doing for her what she planned to do herself.

It was the first murder that had ever taken place in the École Normale. "It was a sacrilege against the purity of the place," recalls Jean-Pierre Lefèbvre, a fellow professor at the École Normale and a member, with Althusser, of the Communist Party cell at the school until 1980. "We were no longer immaculate. The [school's] Director said he thought afterwards that Althusser had remained here too long; it was not a normal situation. But he was so popular." The French press was quick to charge the government with sheltering Althusser from justice, and to lump together madness, Marxism and murder (one paper captioned a photo of Althusser in hospital: "Althusser, the mad philosopher, gives lessons in Marxism to his fellow patients").

He was confined in St Anne's hospital in the 14th arrondissement, within whose austere Third Republic architecture Michel Foucault, years before, had conducted research for his famous history of madness. Althusser now divided his time between hospital and in a flat in the 20th arrondissement he had bought for his retirement. "His intellect never degenerated," Moulrier Boutang, Althusser's biographer, recalls, "but he was deeply depressed, in despair. He was so anxious he was unable to speak."

Moulrier Boutang believes that the future study of Althusser's work will now inevitably be conducted in the light of his autobiography, a rare account of the psychological setting of a philosophy. With no other philosopher is it possible to make a satisfactory inquiry into the relationship between the life and the work. In Althusser's case there is an obvious irony in his being a philosopher whose work denied the validity of human subjectivity ending up in the strange existential predicament of being deprived of legal personhood. It is as if he had fallen into a black hole of his own making. The very term *non-lieu* implies non-existence, being nowhere. Psychologically, the term suggests that the identity he had held onto so fitfully since childhood had finally been extinguished.

After about five years in limbo, Althusser began to sound out his friends about the possibility of resuming his career, of making some sort of public gesture that would remind people that he was, in fact, still alive.

"I said," recalls Jean-Pierre Lefèbvre,

"Louis, you have killed someone, yet you were not convicted. Society thinks you have to pay something for it." As a kind of penance, he advised Althusser to embark on a humble project such as a translation from Latin or Greek. "It was an opinion he didn't want to hear: he was in a manic phase."

In about five weeks, in April and May 1985, riding the tiger of psychotic elation, he wrote *L'avenir dure longtemps*, a text that would serve as his account of the murder, the hypothetical speech he would have given from the dock if he had been brought to trial. At 100,000 words in length, it was the longest book he ever wrote; he produced it at a rate of about 3,000 words a day, hardly sleeping. It is confession and penance combined. He presents, in prose incandescent with emotional pain, a review of his life in general and what led him to murder his wife. He calls himself a fraud and a coward, but defends his achievements as a philosopher.

The irony is not lost on friends such as Régis Debray that the longest (and most successful) book of a philosopher who considered the human personality an illusion should be a confessional autobiography. But it is just one of the many faces of Althusser. "It is a tissue of lies and half-truths," says Pierre Macherey, one of the many friends who opposed its publication. After finishing it he put it in a drawer and only spoke about it to a few close friends, although it was obviously written for publication.

As a result of *l'affaire Althusser*, a bill has been introduced to tighten the French penal code as it affects those judged mentally unfit to stand trial. And the door of the flat on the ground floor of the École Normale through which students called on the old and much-loved professor has been removed and walled in. But above all, the tragic end of the Althusser symbolised for the generation of 1968 the end of Marxism and the PCF as forces in French intellectual life, and left a vacuum no one now alive is big enough to fill.

"*Gravissime!*" says Elisabeth Roudinesco, describing the present crisis in French intellectual life. "We have no Sartre, no Lacan, no Foucault, and now no more Althusser. Lévi-Strauss is alive but he is not the same. He's a conservative. There is only Jacques Derrida. And he doesn't have the position in France that he has abroad. He's not seen as a subversive figure here."

Althusser ended his days in an old people's home in Yvelines, west of Paris, and died of heart failure on 22 October 1990. "He was", wrote a friend, 1 Comte-Sponville, in *Le Monde* two days later, "the unhappiest man I ever met." ●