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An Interview With Jean Raspail

By Katharine Betts

Synopsis of *The Camp of the Saints*

First, we must go back twenty years. It is 1973. For some years now the West has lost all sense of belief in itself and, because of this, has lost the will to defend itself. Such a clever and inventive civilization, this Western culture, but the things it creates are ugly. They destroy the self-respect of those who make them and of those who buy them. And the ideas it produces are worse. The biggest idea that this West of 1973 has produced is "the beast," the idea of "world conscience." This beast is made of two parts, one of guilt and one of anti-racism. The guilt portrays Third World poverty as a consequence of Western greed, while the anti-racism condemns any attempt by the guilt-ridden to protect themselves against the Third World retribution that is to come.

The ugly material goods, the objects that corrupt their makers and consumers, are produced by capitalists. But the ideas come from the critics of capitalism, from left-wing activists and journalists, and from churchmen. And here is a nice paradox: the left dominate the media, but the right have to tolerate them because, without the audiences that left-wing broadcasters attract, the capitalists would have no means of selling their tawdry goods. In France, in particular, a proud tradition has deteriorated. A limping, ramshackle culture, full of self-interested cant, shot through with veins of self-hatred, is to be tested. A mere hundred unseaworthy boats will bring a million uninvited immigrants from the other side of the earth, and France will be found wanting. It will fail the test and all of the West will fail with it.

Over the course of 50 days the armada from the Ganges creeps nearer to the coast of the Midi. The media rejoice, while politicians and the armed forces fumble for a policy. Leaders in each European country agonize over their nation's culpability, and offer sympathy and praise for the voyagers in public. In private, they hope desperately that the ships will land on someone else's shores. But fate is bringing them to France.

Albert Dufort, the trendy radio journalist, knows

that when the armada arrives the people it brings will set off a chain of events that will destroy modern France. But he believes that this destruction will mean the rebirth of man. We in the West are to blame for the injustices poor countries suffer. We condemned our Third World brothers by setting up walls to keep them at a distance. Now they have broken out of their prison and they are coming, seeking justice.

For Dufort, the journey of the armada symbolizes the international redistribution of wealth. He is transported by the imagery, by the symbolism of the events that he reports. With growing excitement, he coins the slogan: "We're all from the Ganges now." School children write essays eulogizing the armada's approach. Any doubts that serious men and women may have about redemption by invasion are washed away in a flood of emotion and self-flagellating rhetoric.

In the last days before the ships lurch through the Straits of Gibraltar to the coast, the French begin to panic. At the eleventh hour, the President orders the military to defend the country, but it is too late. Most of the men desert. The inhabitants of the south flee north, police abandon their posts, jails are opened, prisoners rampage. Dufort flees in his car to Switzerland and is murdered *en route* in a random act of violence. At the same time student revolutionaries journey south to meet their foreign brothers. They do not know that the people from the Ganges are not coming as brothers. The immigrant invaders hate the West, the civilization that has robbed them of the earthly paradise that should be theirs. Rather than rejecting the small welcoming committee of students, they scarcely see them. They surge through the students, and over them, spreading out over a country-side that seems, to them, to be empty of people.

But this is not just the story of the sea-trek of one million in search of a promised land. In all the poor, desperately over-populated countries around the world, hungry souls are poised to follow. They

are monitoring the fortunes of the armada closely. When France puts up only a token, last minute resistance, and the people of the Ganges swarm over the Midi, the others move, too. The beast has done its work and the Third World, full of a sense of injury and entitlement, takes over the First. After 1973, we are indeed "all from the Ganges now."

Who Is Jean Raspail?

The Camp of the Saints is a terrifying book. It holds the reader tightly, even while blood, filth and violence spill from its pages. Few would read it for pleasure. But is it prophecy? Some parts bear the stamp of 1968, the student revolt in Paris, and the particular left-wing enthusiasms of the period. But, twenty years on, the "beast" still speaks with a disconcertingly contemporary voice. The same agonies of guilt, and the same uncertainties about the right of nations to maintain their borders distort immigration debates today, even as they did in this unhappy, fictitious world.

Who wrote this book and why? My husband Gavin and I went to visit the author, M. Jean Raspail, in Paris in October of 1993. We wanted to ask him about his novel and to inquire, on behalf of *The Social Contract Press*, whether he would agree to a new edition of Norman Shapiro's English translation.

M. Raspail has a large ground-floor apartment in a modern building in a quiet and exclusive inner suburb of Paris. There is a glass case full of model soldiers in the lobby. The study is long and narrow, looking out onto a green and private garden, something quite exceptional for this crowded city.

The French *Who's Who* lists M. Raspail as a traveler and explorer, as well as a writer. There are books in the study, of course, but also many engravings of Native Americans. In 1950-52, he led the Tierra del Fuego-Alaska car trek, and in 1954, the French research expedition to the land of the Incas. Possibly the engravings date from this period, and from his association with Patagonia. (In 1981 his novel, *Moi, Antoine de Tounens, roi de Patagonie*, won the *Grand Prix de Roman* from the Academie Francaise — the major prize for novels in France.) There is a large model battleship on the floor of the study. The original art work for the cover of the first edition of *The Camp of the Saints* stands on a side table; it shows a motley collection of boats which have come to rest in the shallows, while strong, brown-skinned men stride ashore across the beach.

M. Raspail is a tall man of soldierly bearing. He is a traditionalist. While he is courtesy and gentleness itself in his manner towards us, he dislikes the incursions that Anglo-Americanisms have made into the French culture. Though he once knew some English, he no longer wishes to use it. Gavin and I make do with our limited French.

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Our first question is the obvious one: Do you think that the vision portrayed in your book is coming true? The answer: Haven't you seen the preface to the third (1985) French edition of the book? No, indeed we hadn't.

We should read it. This preface explains that the book is symbolic, a parable.² History is speeded up to happen over the course of days rather than a couple of decades or a generation. In real life things don't come about so quickly, but the principle remains the same. The Third World invasion of the West is unavoidable. If we don't see it, our children will.

How did people react when the book first came out? M. Raspail said that the response was very different in the United States compared to France. He wasn't very well known in France in 1973 and the immediate reaction to the book was silence. It only began to sell six or eight months after it first appeared. It sold by word of mouth. Some people bought large numbers of copies — 100 to 150 at a time. In contrast, in the U.S. there was a strong reaction in the press immediately, some against, many for. He still receives many letters from the States.

We mentioned Gary Freeman's recent article on comparative immigration policy, and his comment that more and more analysts were taking *The Camp of the Saints* seriously.³ Did he think that this was happening? It was possible. But he then went on to talk a little about how he had come to write the book. It was an idea that came to him then — he couldn't write the same book today. It requires nerve to do such a thing. (In the 1985 preface M. Raspail talks about how the book took 18 months to write, and of how it consumed and aged him.)

We knew of Shapiro's English translation but we asked him about others. It has now been translated into every major European language, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Italian, Dutch and so on. In France, it is constantly in print.

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Why was it that he had portrayed the conflict in the book in terms of race, brown and black against white, rather than in terms of conflict between groups marked out by different cultures? M. Raspail replied that this was a big question. He said that it is race that gives culture its mark in the beginning. Yes, different races can indeed assimilate to different cultures. He reminded us of the book's M. Hamadura, the black ex-deputy of Pondicherry, the one who joins the small band of stalwarts who hold out for a few weeks defending one last little corner of Provence. Hamadura says that being white isn't really a question of color. It's a whole mental outlook, a state of mind. But, Raspail said, later the racial distinctions can come back.

It had struck me that the book was every bit as much about his disgust with French society as it was about the Third World population explosion. So we asked him if the events of May 1968 in France, the student uprising, the wave of strikes, had had much influence on him. Yes, they had. When he was writing the book he had been full of a sense of the degeneration of his society and of its lack of intelligence.

We asked him about his vision of the West, this West that had lost all confidence in itself as a worthwhile civilization. Where did he think this mentality ("the beast") had come from? He said this was a difficult question. It was a collection of things; one couldn't really say. In one sense the West is more than ever triumphant, but it has a conception of the rights of man. In its original form this was an excellent idea, but it has now been misapplied and it is being used against France, the very country that had first conceived it.

We also asked him about his opinion of recent actions that the French government had taken to try to tighten the rules governing entry for family reunion and for people seeking political asylum. Did he think that these measures would amount to anything? No. It is impossible to do anything. It's too late. There have been mass movements of people already and there are now too many to send back. "These steps that Balladur (the Prime Minister) and Pasqua (Minister for the Interior) are taking are just to appease the electorate. They won't make any difference."

How did he see the future of the West? "*Je n'en sais rien.*" (Literally, "I know nothing about it," but "I have no idea" is probably a better translation.)

Further Reflections

After we left we went straight to the bookshop M. Raspail had recommended in order to seek out the 1985 edition. It was now 11:30 in the morning. The shop was

small and intimate, set in a back street. It was presided over by two men who reminded me of the novel's M. Machefer, the elderly and eccentric proprietor of the newspaper, *La Pensée Nationale*, and one of his acolytes. (Machefer is one of the few to warn of the dangers the armada presents. A few youths, young conservatives who share his views, help with the paper. But their voice is small and easily suppressed.)

True to form, both were smoking cigars, and empty champagne flutes stood on the counter beside them. *Le Camp des Saints*? Yes, of course they had it. A wonderful book — a true masterpiece. We also bought M. Raspail's most recent novel, *Sept Cavaliers*. This included a brochure about the author, describing his aristocratic and traditional vision. [See Laura Tanton's translation of this flier on page 91.] It quotes his words, "*C'est toujours l'âme qui gagne les combats décisifs*—It's always the soul that wins the decisive battles." Readers of *The Camp* will recall the passage where the armada is headed off from entering the Red Sea by a tough Egyptian admiral. The Egyptian's stance is closer to the firm resolve of the Ganges' immigrant invaders than it is to that of France. Raspail comments, "Two opposing camps. One still believes. One doesn't. The one that still has faith will move mountains. That's the side that will win. Deadly doubt has destroyed all incentive in the other. That's the side that will lose."⁴

Is M. Raspail's novel a prophecy fulfilled, complete with an explanation for why the disaster happened and why it is now too late? Are we losing our heritage because we have lost faith in our civilization, and is the story now well on the way to its dénouement? Freeman's work is a careful analysis of the increasingly firm response of immigrant-receiving nations in the face of growing pressure for entry. It suggests that we are looking at a conditional prediction in this novel rather than a certain prophecy. If nations behave in the vacillating and foolish manner described in *The Camp of the Saints*, then the serious situation that North America, Europe and Australia now confront will indeed worsen, and the outcome will surely not maximize human happiness, either for hosts or immigrants. But, if sensible and well-coordinated policies are adopted, M. Raspail's grand epic can be read as one picture of a possible future, a future that we may have the wit to see and the courage to avert. ■

NOTES

¹ Paris, September 1993.

² See J. Raspail, "The author's comment on *The Camp of the Saints*, (translated by G. Bikales), *The Social Contract*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1993-4, pp. 115-117; also on p.99 of this issue..

³ G. Freeman, "Migration policy and politics in the receiving states," *International Migration Review*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 1992, pp. 1144-1167

⁴ *The Camp of the Saints*, p. 130 in the 1977 *Sphere Books* paperback.