

Letter to the Editor

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Dear Professors,

I received the fall 1993 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* only a few weeks ago, so I will probably be the last one in a series of ex-Amsterdammers to point out to you that de Jordaan is not the former Jewish quarter (*Amsterdam as a source of symbols for Camus' The Fall*, CJNS/RCEN, XIV, ii, p. 34). The Jordaan is a working class neighbourhood situated between Prinsen-, Brouwers-, - Looiers- en Lijnbaansgracht. According to some the name (a corruption of *jardin*) was given by Huguenot immigrants and the flowery street names seem to support that thesis: Bloemgracht, Laurierstraat, Rozengracht, etc. The old Jewish quarter lies on the other side of the city's centre: south-east of the Nieuwmarkt.

I had not read *La Chute* since it first appeared in 1956 and your article prompted me to a long overdue re-reading (thank you!). First of all to see where you found the Jordaan reference (it was not there), second, to indulge in some nostalgia by once more retracing Clamence's itinerary on his walks through the centre of Amsterdam and third, for the usual benefits of discovering ways of seeing missed in a first reading.

The itinerary of the *juge-pénitent* was exactly as I remembered it. When *La Chute* was published I lived in the Sint Antoniesbreestraat and I worked at *Het Vrije Volk* on the Hekelveld. My usual route between home and work led over the Zeedijk and on going home, frequently well past midnight, I often stopped at some bar in that street, usually the *Casablanca* or the café run by *tante* Bet van Beeren. I cannot remember if there was a *Mexico-City* on the Zeedijk, but the name sounds plausible. Many evenings this typical *bourgeois égaré* (160, *La Chute*, Editions Gallimard, 1956; all references below refer to this edition), expected to see Clamence behind his

glass of *genièvre* and hoped that he would start on his discourse, but the people who addressed me usually had more frivolous subjects in mind.

I imagined him living in the same house in the Sint Antoniesbreestraat where I occupied a second-floor apartment. His bell needed to be rung three times (136) so that meant that he lived right above me!

There were no bridges to be crossed when walking back from the Zeedijk to this main street of the old Jewish quarter, where most houses were in ruins and where the house in which Clamence and I once lived was torn down in the sixties or seventies to make way for a shopping centre. Coming from the Zeedijk the old Jewish quarter was located at the other side of the Nieuwmarkt and encompassed the Sint Antoniesbreestraat, the Jodenbreestraat with the Rembrandt House, the Waterlooplein, the Jonas-Daniel Meijerplein, the Weesperstraat, the Muiderstraat and their cross streets.

In this entire area the Sint Antoniesbreestraat is the only location from where one does not have to cross a bridge when going to the Zeedijk. When Clamence walks his new friend halfway home from the *Mexico-City* bar to his hotel on the Damrak (15) he says goodbye at the bridge over the Oudezijds Kolk (20).

From this point on the Zeedijk leads straight to the wide bridge which connects the Prins Hendrikkade with the Damrak. The water of the Open Havenfront at the point where the Zeedijk joins the Prins Hendrikkade had shortly after the war enough boats tied up (including the training ship *Pollux*) to be called the *port* (15). It was also (behind the *Noordhollands Koffiehuis*) the arrival and departure point for the boats to the island of Marken. Ships navigating this body of water or the IJ behind the Central Station sounded their foghorns when weather conditions demanded it (15) and the sound could indeed be heard in the area of Clamence's peregrinations between Zeedijk and Sint Antoniesbreestraat.

From the bridge where the two separate one can

indeed see, at the corner of Oudezijds Voorburgwal and Nieuwebrugsteeg, *ces dames derrière ces vitrines* (21). One canal over, on the Oudezijds Achterburgwal, stands an old warehouse of the former Dutch East India Company, that in the fifties still smelled strongly of spices from the orient. Camus transfers this aroma to the perfume used by the ladies of easy virtue (*ces personnes se parfument aux épices*, p. 21). Such a marvelously poetic gesture! A few houses beyond where Clamence and his new friend observe the prostitutes stands the building that houses *Ons Lieve Heer op Solder* (133).

The café at the corner of the bridge over het Kolkje (I have forgotten its name) was in the fifties a meeting place where the young poets who were later called *De Vijftigers* gave public readings of their poems. I wonder if Camus was aware of the literary activities going on so close to the spot where Clamence and his new acquaintance parted company. Probably not.

Amsterdam's topography, sometimes erroneous as pointed out by you, but often, as I have indicated above, amazingly accurate, is of course not the main subject of *La Chute*, although the reference to the concentric canals and the allusion to Dante definitely have a bearing on the moral dilemma at the heart of the story. During my second reading I was struck by the structural parallel between these concentric canals and Clamence's gradual revelations. The *juge-pénitent* at the *Mexico-City* bar seems at first a nice man to talk to, then we are made to admire the good deeds of this adult boy scout who helps the blind cross the street (27 ff.), but when we gradually penetrate deeper into his interior (like the concentric canals that in ever-narrowing circles finally zoom in on the bull's eye of the sinful Zeedijk area), he turns out to be not so nice at all: he is cruel to his women (69 ff) and even confesses to having drunk the water meant for a dying man (147).

Your conclusion that *La Chute* encourages us to come to grips with the nature of reality is of course entirely justified, but is this not the stock in trade of all good literature? What makes Camus' *récit* unique is the moral dilemma which is central to the story: Clamence's failure to rescue a drowning woman (82), his inability to atone and in the end our complicity in the act as well as in the guilt that follows. It is easy to reject and condemn Clamence's misdeeds (his

cruelty to women, his taking the water of a dying man) and we may consider ourselves morally superior, but in Clamence's failure to act decisively on the Pont Royal we are *nolens volens* forced to recognize our own vulnerability. This is truly *la condition humaine* (Clamence calls it *la condition commune*, p. 165): we have the capacity to be good but we fail to live up to it. Camus is a moralist in the French literary tradition and as true penitents we wind up next to *un tas de cendres* on the island of Marken (86), ready to tear our clothing and cover our heads with ashes. That heap of ashes (Dutch: *sintels*, probably serving for dike maintenance; *cendres* may be better translated here by *cinders* or *slag*) is not called a dune by Camus; he writes that the *inhabitants* call them dunes. I do not know Marken, but it is possible that the vernacular of the former island uses this word in this particular context. My experiences on the Wadden islands have taught me that such shifts in etymology are not unheard of and the Marker dunes would need further investigation before being rejected outright. As for the house with the negro heads, p. 53, I am sure it exists!

The cry for help that Clamence ignored on the Quai Voltaire, keeps on reverberating through the world (126) but it is improbable that humanity will heed it. We could, if we wanted to, we know that we could even clamour for a second chance, but we won't (170). We will take the easy way out and continue to avoid bridges at night-time, just to be sure. How far are we here from Rieux's positive and hopeful attitude at the end of *La Peste: au milieu des fléaux...il y a dans les hommes plus de choses à admirer que de choses à mépriser* (*La Peste*, Éditions Gallimard, 1947, p. 331).

In *La Chute* Amsterdam is an unreal city, hidden by a *brume de néon, de genièvre et de menthe*. There is a reason why Camus set this story in Amsterdam and not in Algeria, under the hot sun of *L'Étranger*, of *La Peste* and of the stories in *L'Exil et le royaume*. He needed the mist, the canals, the foghorns and the numbing glow of the *genièvre* to give additional power to the grim message that we have lost the kingdom and that we are indeed in exile, condemned to wander aimlessly in the mist along the concentric canals of Amsterdam.

As for me, I would not mind wandering once more through the mists of my beloved city and sip a

glass of jenever in a small café. Not on the Zeedijk though; that area has been taken over by the drug trade. Perhaps in the Jordaan!

Best regards,

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