

The void in Camus's *The Fall*: A trip from Amsterdam, to Ghent and Paris and back again

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The Fall (*La Chute*) was published in 1956 and was the last complete novel completed in Camus's lifetime.¹ He was killed in a car accident on January 4, 1960 and in his briefcase was found the incomplete manuscript of *The First Man* (*Le Premier homme*) which was published in 1994. Camus's first two novels, *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*) and *The Plague* (*La Peste*), were set in Algeria where he was born in 1913. *The Fall* differs from them in that it is set in Amsterdam, but it is also a much more complex and allusive novel.

The Fall is also Camus's first major work after *The Rebel* (*L'Homme révolté*), published in October 1951. This work denounces "the slave camps under the banner of freedom and massacres justified by the love of man", and it lauds balanced and "Mediterranean thinking" (Camus 1965, 413-414; 707). The work was a straight forward attack on his erstwhile left-wing friends who saw in the Soviet Union the new saviour of mankind. However, a novelist's approach must be more allusive and he must allow his reader to uncover the message through much more enigmatic signs. The result is a multifaceted work in which the significance of names, places and elusive references must be deftly grasped. For example, the novel's title does not just refer back to the biblical fall of man, or that of the mythological Icarus who wished to reach the sun, but also to the "fall" of the young woman into the Seine and, finally, to the fall of modern man into hypocrisy and cowardice.

Then again, the narrator's name is a direct reference to St. John the Baptist, described in the New Testament as the precursor of Christ. Amsterdam's "Zeedijk area" is compared to Dante's Hell, and below that surface, one can recognize Paris, the city in which both the narrator and his anonymous interlocutor practised law. The detailed description of Amsterdam is essential to an understanding of the novel's purport since it is portrayed in contrastive terms

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with Paris and therefore allows us to better grasp Camus's intent, which is to see the modern intellectual - and specifically the French intellectual - as a person who is duplicitous but eager to judge his fellow man and in whose heart resides a moral void since he is at all times eager to ignore what has occurred behind him, while simultaneously lacking the courage to help those who cannot help themselves.

The use of the stolen panel 'The Righteous Judges' from the Ghent's cathedral altar piece is equally important because of the subtle and sophisticated use that the novelist makes of it. Camus never visited the cathedral² but he may have read P. Coreman's *Van Eyck: L'Adoration de l'agneau mystique* (1946), which contains a detailed description of the altar piece's convoluted history, while also showing the blank rectangular space which contained the painting of the stolen panel. From Coreman's description, Camus may also have learned that the back of the panel, which the thief returned, contained the painting of St. John the Baptist. This detail may have inspired Camus to name his narrator after him. In that sense it could be argued that in the novel, Camus has managed to reunite the two panels that had been separated but, at the same time, he provides a new twist. He may have borrowed St. John's name but his behaviour is opposite to him and, additionally, he is not a 'righteous' judge but a judge/penitent.

Jean-Baptiste may well be clamouring in the 'modern' desert but, instead of being on a pilgrimage to the Lamb of God, namely the Innocent one, his ultimate goal is to denounce all men, including Christ, as guilty, and to insist on their cowardice.

The novel opens with Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a Parisian lawyer addressing an unknown customer in the bar 'Mexico City', situated in Amsterdam's notorious Zeedijk district. One assumes that this 'stranger' will quickly identify himself and participate in the discussion so that this monologue will turn into a lively dialogue. But nothing of the sort occurs! We do ultimately discover that this customer is a fellow Parisian lawyer (F, 5; 44/OC, 765)³ but, aside from that, his identity remains unknown. All his responses are absorbed in Clamence's monologue and this Parisian remains but a hollow presence, a spectre who accompanies Clamence to the end.

These two Frenchmen are sophisticated individuals, as is indicated by Clamence's use of the imperfect subjunctive when he states: "Quand je vivais en France, je ne pouvais rencontrer un homme d'esprit sans qu'aussitôt j'en fisse ma

² Correction. I have since read *Albert Camus, Maria Casarès. Correspondance. 1944-1959*. Ed. Catherine Camus. Paris: Gallimard, 2017. On page 984 Camus writes to Maria Casarès from Bruges and indicates that he visited Ghent the day before.

³ All references to the English translation of Albert Camus (1956) *The Fall*, translated by Justin O'Brien, as well as to the definitive edition of Albert Camus's complete works, Albert Camus (2008) *Œuvres complètes, iii: 1949-1956*, are incorporated in the text as follow: (F, .../OC,...).

société” (imperfect subjunctive italicized), and he continues: “Ah! je vois que vous bronchez sur cet imparfait du subjonctif!” Justin O’Brien translates this as follows: “When I used to live in France, were I to meet an intelligent man I immediately sought his company,” and: “Ah, I see you smile [rather than ‘flinch’] at that use of the subjunctive” (F, 5/OC, 698). The present subjunctive is common enough in spoken French but Clamence is using the imperfect subjunctive which is reserved for literary French and this usage marks him as someone who wishes to be recognized as super-sophisticated.

Clamence immediately contrasts himself with the owner of the Mexico City bar. He typescasts him as a ‘gorilla’, who is monolingual – however unlikely that may seem in cosmopolitan Amsterdam – and who does not care what his clients think. This ‘big animal’s’ motto is: “Take it or leave it.” Clamence opines: “Imagine the Cro-Magnon man living in the tower of Babel! But no, this one does not feel exiled, he goes his way, nothing bothers him.” As all educated Frenchmen know, ‘Cro-Magnon man’ was the earliest form of the modern human. Its remains were found near Les Eyzies, Dordogne, France in 1868, but then he adds that ‘this primate’ also possesses a ‘suspicious character’. Clamence assumes that it might explain the latter’s “shadowy and grave look, as if he suspected that something is not quite right between people” (In French Clamence states: “que quelque chose ne tourne pas rond [i.e. “round”] entre les hommes” [F, 4/OC, 698]). Not surprisingly, a little later when the two lawyers are walking home along Amsterdam’s canals, he remarks: “[W]e are at the heart of things here. Have you noticed that Amsterdam’s concentric canals resemble the circles of hell? The middle-class hell, of course, peopled with bad dreams” (F, 7-8/OC, 702). It is for that reason that Clamence prefers the ‘primitive’ inhabitants of the Mexico City bar and he is especially attracted to the barman “because [these kinds of creatures] are of one piece”; and he even feels some “nostalgia for [these] primates [because] they don’t have ulterior motives.” Of course, Clamence considers himself to be very different since he possesses ‘a communicative nature’ and is quite ‘garrulous’.

Back in the bar, he asks his fellow Parisian to look up and points out something that will assume great significance at the end of the novel’s second half:

Notice, [...], on the back wall above [the barman’s] head, that empty rectangle marking the place where a picture has been taken down. [And he continues:] Indeed, there was a picture there, and a particularly interesting one, a real masterpiece. Well, I was present when the master of the house received it and when he gave it up. In both cases he did so with the same distrust, after weeks of rumination. In that regard you must admit that society has somewhat spoiled the frank simplicity of his nature.

(F, 5/OC, 698)

In the last pages, Clamence, who has invited his interlocutor to his abode, asks him to open a cupboard in his room and tells him:

Yes, look at that painting. Don't you recognize it? It is "The Just Judges." That doesn't make you jump? Can it be that your culture has gaps? [In French he uses "des trous" i.e. 'holes'; 'voids']. Yet if you read the papers, you would recall the theft in 1934 in the St. Bavon Cathedral of Ghent, of one of the panels of the famous van Eyck altarpiece, "The Adoration of the Lamb." That panel was called "The Just Judges." It represented judges on horseback coming to adore the sacred animal. It was replaced by an excellent copy, for the original was never found. Well, here it is. No, I had nothing to do with it. A frequenter of *Mexico City* [...] sold it to the ape for a bottle, one drunken evening. [...] For a long time... our devout judges sat enthroned at *Mexico City* above the drunks and pimps. Then the ape, at my request, put it in custody here. [...] Since then, these estimable magistrates form my sole company. At *Mexico City*, above the bar, you saw what a *void* [italics added] they left. (F, 39/OC, 756)

In French these judges are called "les juges intègres"; and that adjective also means 'complete' or 'one'; however, as we will later discover, Jean-Baptiste Clamence is double since he claims to be both a judge and a penitent!

It is indeed true that the panel was never recovered and has been replaced by an excellent copy that only the cognoscenti can recognize as a fake. Nevertheless, Camus leaves an important 'detail' out of Clamence's monologue:

In the night of April 10, 1934 the panels "The Righteous Judges" and "St John the Baptist" [were] stolen.... The first missing report only mention[ed] one panel! A mistake that is often made because the [two] panels once formed the front and back of one single panel, but [...] were separated [when it was in German possession] in 1894. On May 1 Monsignor Coppieters, [received a] ransom demand of 1 million francs.... In [one of the letters that followed] there [was] a deposit receipt [for the Brussels railway station's] luggage office. There [the police discovered] a package When it was opened [...] the undamaged grisaille of St John the Baptist was discovered. (The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb 2007, 2-3)

Camus never visited Ghent or the St. Bavon Cathedral⁴, but nevertheless he must have had an in-depth knowledge of the altar piece's history and must have been aware of the panels' eventful past. However, Camus's artful omission is very helpful in explaining his protagonist's role. Like his namesake John the Baptist – featured on the back panel – Clamence wears 'a camel hair coat' even if "the camel

⁴ But see footnote 2.

that provided the hair for [his] overcoat was probably mangy" (F, 6/OC, 700). He also "clamours in the desert" and ultimately wishes that he may be "decapitated" (F, 44/OC, 764). However, since he claims to be both judge and penitent (F, 6/OC, 703) his behaviour is very much unlike John the Baptist especially in the second part of the novel.

We do know, however, that Camus visited Amsterdam "from October 4 to 7, 1954" (Lottman 1979, 538-539) and it explains why the author chose this 'watery' hell hole for Clamence to plie his trade as the legal counsel (F, 7-8/OC, 714) of Mexico City's low life.

It must be stressed that when Clamence refers to its habitués he does not disparage them. As he remarks: "these gentlemen over here [who] live off the labo[u]rs of those ladies over there. [...] They are] more moral than [...] those who kill in the bosom of the family by attrition. [...] And yet, even if f]rom time to time, these gentlemen indulge in a little knife or revolver play, don't get the idea that they're keen on it. Their role calls for it" (F, 6/OC, 699). If he stresses that these members of Amsterdam's low life are 'preferable' to the Parisian élite, whom he characterizes as piranhas, it is that he much appreciates their blatant honesty which distinguishes them from the hypocritical Parisian élite. That night, after the two Frenchmen leave the bar, Clamence walks his friend back to his hotel and he reveals that he lives in the Jewish quarter but then immediately corrects himself:

or what was called so until our Hitlerian brethren made room. What a cleanup! Seventy-five thousand Jews deported or assassinated; [now] that's [a] real [void]. I admire that diligence, that methodological patience! When one *has* no character one has to apply a method. Here it did wonders incontrovertibly, and I am living on the site of one the greatest crimes in history. (F, 7/OC, 701)

Given what happened to the Jewish community, it is not surprising that the city reminds him of "hell" (F, 7-8/OC, 702). Therefore, when near the end of his monologue, Clamence accuses himself of *the crime of omission*, that is to say of not having attempted to save the young woman who had thrown herself into the Seine, one can only say that it pales in comparison to what happened in the Jewish quarter where thousands of persons were *deliberately* and *brutally* exterminated on the simple grounds that *their identity* made them subhuman. And, of course, the fact that Clamence has chosen this city - Amsterdam - as his domicile is a stark reminder that much more is at stake in this novel than a stolen panel or a helpless, drowning woman. In addition, it also makes forcefully clear that modern man's inhumanity to man is perpetrated mostly in a *void* and, more often than not, *behind* a façade of respectability.

Hence, it is for this reason that Clamence compares Amsterdam to Paris: “[The latter] is a real *trompe-l’oeil*, a magnificent stage-setting inhabited by four million silhouettes. [...] It always seemed to me that our fellow citizens had two passions: ideas and fornication. [...] Still, [...] they are not the only ones, for all Europe is in the same boat” (F, 5-6/OC, 698-699). ‘Trompe l’oeil’, a popular art form, uses two dimensions to create the illusion of depth, i.e. the third dimension. Ironically, however, it appears that, historically speaking, the ‘shameless’ Dutch do not need to create illusions since they refuse to ‘hide’ their nefarious deeds. This is the reason why, on their second walk, Clamence asks his fellow Parisian to appreciate the beauty of a house they are passing by:

Charming house, isn't it? The two heads you see up there are heads of Negro slaves. [...] The house belonged to a slave dealer. Oh, they weren't squeamish in those days! They had assurance; they announced: “You see, I'm a man of substance; I'm in the slave trade; I deal in black flesh.” Can you imagine anyone today making it known publicly that such is his business? [...] I can hear my Parisian colleagues right now [...] Slavery? – certainly not, we are against it! That we should be forced to establish it at home or in our factories – well, that's natural; but boasting about it, that's the limit!

(F, 16/OC, 716)

The Dutch blatantly advertise their inhuman trade but even if Clamence does not consider them morally superior to the French, he prefers them to the hypocritical Parisian élite and he goes out of his way to stress their brutal honesty.

Additionally, the country's seemingly simplistic inhabitants share a characteristic with Clamence:

I like them, for they are double. They are here and elsewhere. [...] Holland is a dream, *monsieur*, a dream of gold and smoke - smokier by day, more gilded by night. And night and day that dream is peopled with Lohengrins like these, dreamily riding their black bicycles with high handle-bars, funereal swans constantly drifting throughout the whole land, around the seas, along the canals. Their heads in the copper-coloured clouds, they dream; they cycle in circles; they pray, somnambulists in the fog's gilded incense; they have ceased to be here. They have gone thousands of miles away, toward Java, the distant isle. They pray to those grimacing gods of Indonesia [... and these] remind these homesick colonials that Holland is not only the Europe of merchants but also the sea, the sea that leads to Cipango and to those islands where men die mad and happy. (F, 7/OC, 702)

One cannot help but hear in this idyllic description echoes of Baudelaire's poem *Invitation to the Voyage*:

The oriental splendor, all would whisper there/ Secretly to the soul/ In its soft native language/ [...] See on the canals/ Those vessels sleeping. Their mood is adventurous;/ [...] they come from the ends of the earth./ –The setting suns/ adorn the fields/ the canals, the whole city/ With hyacinth and gold;/ The world falls asleep/ In a glow of light. There all is order and beauty, Luxuriousness, peace and pleasure. (Baudelaire 1954)⁵

Next, Clamence establishes a link between Amsterdam's topography and that of Paris. When wishing his interlocutor good-night, he states that he will not go any farther and provides the first hint for his refusal to cross a bridge at night:

I'll leave you near this bridge. I never cross a bridge at night. It's the result of a vow. Suppose, after all, that someone should jump in the water. One of two things – either you do likewise to fish him out and, in cold weather, you run a great risk! Or you forsake him there and suppressed dives sometimes leave one strangely aching. (F, 8/OC, iii, 703)

However, it will take Clamence time to explain in detail what happened on a certain 'evening', and, even when he is pressed to reveal what occurred that fateful night, he dawdles: "I'll get to it, be patient with me" (F, 12/OC, 710). In fact, first, Clamence needs to explain what happened to him "two or three years ago" (F, 23/OC, 728), but *after* the fateful incident which closes the novel's first half. While crossing "the Pont des Arts" and feeling "a sense of completion [...and] satisfaction, at that very moment, a laugh burst out behind [him]." And somewhat later, at home, he "heard laughter under [his] windows"... and when he "went to the bathroom [...his] reflection was smiling in the mirror, but it seemed to [him] that [his] smile was double" (F, 14-15/OC, 713).

He has now come to the nagging realization that he is a ridiculous and pompous fool, and finally proceeds to narrate the fateful moment that gives the novel its title *The Fall*:

I was returning to the left Bank and my home by way of the Pont Royal. It was an hour past midnight [...]. I had just left a mistress, who was surely already asleep. [...] On the bridge I passed behind a figure leaning over the railing and seeming to stare at the river. On closer view, I made out a slim young woman dressed in black. The back of her neck, cool and damp between her dark hair and coat collar, stirred me. But I went on after a

⁵ La splendeur orientale,/ Tout y parlerait/ À l'âme en secret/ Sa douce langue natale/ [...] Vois sur les canaux/ Dormir ces vaisseaux/ Dont l'humeur est vagabonde/ [...] ils viennent du bout du monde./ — Les soleils couchants/ Revêtent les champs,/ Les canaux, la ville entière,/ D'hyacinthe et d'or;/ Le monde s'endort/ Dans une chaude lumière./ Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté/ Luxe, calme et volupté. (Baudelaire 1967)

moment's hesitation. At the end of the bridge I followed the quays toward Saint-Michel, where I lived. (F, 23/OC, 727)

Once again, he only sees the woman from '*behind*' when he crosses the bridge. It is only when he is "some fifty yards" away and the bridge is quite far '*behind*' him, that he "hear[s] the sound – which, despite the distance, seemed dreadfully loud in the midnight silence – of a body striking the water." (F, 23/OC, 727)

At that moment, Clamence

stopped short, but without turning around. Almost at once [he] heard a cry, repeated several times, which was going downstream; then it suddenly ceased. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable. [He] wanted to run and yet didn't stir. [He] was trembling, [he] believe[d] from cold and shock. [He] told [him]self that [he] had to be quick and [he] felt an irresistible weakness steal over [him]. [He has] forgotten what [he] thought then. "Too late, too far..." or something of the sort. [He] was still listening as [he] stood motionless. Then, slowly under the rain, [he] went away. [He] informed no one. (F, 23/OC, 727-728)

Virtuous behaviour had been easy for Clamence when it was a simple matter of helping an old person across the street but this tragic situation puts his entire being to the test, and it is at this moment that Clamence turns cowardly and shrinks away. From now on he will have to live with the fact that he had been unwilling to risk his life to save another person. When his interlocutor asks him about the woman's fate, he admits he went into denial: "Oh, I don't know. Really I don't know. The next day, and the days following, I didn't read the papers" (F, 23/OC, 728-729). This is the same Clamence who had defined modern man as follows: "I sometimes think of what future historians will say of us. A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers" (F, 6/OC, 699). Indeed, sex had been on his mind when he passed behind the woman but now he has stopped reading the newspapers to avoid facing the facts and being confronted with the stark reality that he lacked the courage to save a woman from drowning!

One might think that from this point on, Clamence willingly placed his crime front and centre and faced squarely the event that had remained obscured '*behind him*' and '*behind all of us*'. Yet, even though he now claims that we are all both judges and penitents since "we don't have enough energy to do good nor enough to do evil", he continues to occupy a middle ground: "Then you know that Dante accepts the idea of neutral angels in the quarrel between God and Satan. And he places them in Limbo, a sort of vestibule of his Hell. We are in the vestibule, [my dear friend]" (F, 27/OC, 735). But, of course, that fateful evening continues to haunt him and finally he realizes that he cannot escape from it:

One day, however, during a trip [...] I was aboard an ocean liner – on the upper deck, of course. Suddenly, far off at sea, I perceived a black speck on the steel-grey ocean. I turned away at once and my heart began to beat wildly. When I forced myself to look, the black speck had disappeared. [...] Then] I saw it again. It was one of those bits of refuse that ships leave behind them. Yet I had not been able to endure watching it; for I had thought at once of a drowning person. (F, 33-34/OC, 746)

As a consequence, Clamence will now attempt to suppress his guilt by ‘drowning’ himself in debauchery, and one is reminded of Pascal (1966)’s remarks about the major reason for man’s need for diversions and entertainment: “the reason [...] lies in our unhappy, feeble and mortal condition which makes us so miserable that nothing can console us when we think about it.”⁶ But Clamence, as a modern non-believer, makes clear that he has gone far beyond that because he is already living in hell:

God is [no longer] needed to create guilt or to punish. [...] You were speaking of the Last Judgement [he says to his friend]. Allow me to laugh respectfully. I shall wait for it resolutely, for I have known what is worse, the judgement of men. For them [there are] no extenuating circumstances; even the good intention is ascribed to crime. (F, 34/OC, 747-748)

In other words, to quote Camus’s favourite author, Nietzsche: “God is dead”, and there has been a ‘transformation of all values’ and Clamence’s behaviour is a prime example of it. He is unlike John the Baptist because he avoids the water and he is no Christ figure either, even though he thinks he has something in common with both. In his universe everyone is guilty, including Christ, as Clamence explains:

[D]o you know why he was crucified [...]? [...] The real reason is that *he* knew that he was not altogether innocent. [...] He was at the source, after all; he must have heard of a certain Slaughter of the Innocents. The children of Judea massacred while his parents were taking him to a safe place – why did they die if not because of him? Those blood-spattered soldiers, those infants cut in two filled him with horror. But given the man he was, I am sure he could not forget them. (F, 34-35/OC, 748-749)

The Bible makes little of Christ’s guilt by association but Clamence cannot help but speak of it. He is well aware of Christ’s agony on the cross (F, 35/OC, 749), but as a judge/penitent he needs to find him also guilty. After all, if “we cannot assert

⁶ “la raison [...] consiste dans le malheur de notre condition faible et mortelle, et si misérable, que rien ne peut nous consoler, lorsque nous y pensons de près.” (Pascal 1966, ii, 66)

the innocence of anyone, [...] we can state with certainty the guilt of all. Every man testifies to the crime of all the others – that is my faith and my hope” (F, 34/OC, 747).

After he has shown his fellow Parisian the panel of ‘The Righteous Judges’, he explains why he has not returned it to its rightful owners. He admits being guilty of harbouring stolen goods but feels justified because now it belongs to “the owner of *Mexico City* bar [who] deserves it just as much as the [...] bishop of Ghent.” And he provides another reason: “all those who file by ‘The Adoration of the Lamb’ will be unable to distinguish the copy from the original and hence no one is wronged by my misconduct.” In addition, he remarks: “in this way, I dominate. False judges are held up to the world’s admiration and I alone know the true ones.” Of course, Clamence may be in possession of the ‘righteous’ judges but he is not one of them because he is also a penitent, that is to say, guilty. Clamence concludes: “Finally, [...] everything is in harmony. Justice being definitely separated from innocence – the latter on the cross – the former in the cupboard – I have the way clear to work according to my convictions.” With one stroke Clamence has undone the intent behind the altar piece whose central figure, the Lamb, represents Christ’s innocence and, as a consequence, from now on he can play his new role of judge/penitent in the *Mexico City* bar and rule over everyone because as he says: “[it is frequented] by men from all corners of the world [...] [and when] I preach in my church of *Mexico City*, I invite the good people to submit to authority and humbly to solicit the comforts of slavery, even if I have to present it as true freedom” (F, 42; 41/OC, 760-761). Here we hear echoes of Hegel’s master-slave relationship but it is also a comment on his erstwhile friend Sartre who as a ‘critical fellow traveller’ of the French Communist Party had opted to side with it and the Soviet Union.

Clamence’s final wish is that his crime be uncovered because, as an ‘accomplice’ in the panel’s theft, he might even be beheaded and then: “All would be consummated and, unseen and unheard, [he] would have completed [his] career as a false prophet who cried out in the desert but refused to leave it.” His execution would have completed the circle but, unlike the Biblical John the Baptist who was beheaded when he denounced King Herod’s and Salomé’s licentious behaviour, our Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a false prophet, wants to dominate today’s morally arid void. Now only one task remains. When his interlocutor tells him that he is *also* a Parisian lawyer and hence very much ‘like’ him, he asks him to reveal “what happened to [him] one night on the banks of the Seine and how [he] succeeded in never risking [his] life.” At that moment, he fully adopts his interlocutor’s voice, speaks for him and implies that the two of them are equally cowardly: ““Oh young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance to save both of us!”” But clearly, neither he nor his

colleague would dare immerse themselves in the Seine's freezing water. And he is sure his colleague will agree: "A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion! Just suppose, [...], we should be taken literally? We'd have to go through with it. Brr...! The water's so cold! But let's not worry! It's too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!" (F, 44/OC, 765).

With these remarks, Clamence confirms his inveterate cowardice, but, of course, his real intention is to speak for all because he wants to indict an entire generation. The void behind the Mexico City's barman, the void left by the Nazis in Amsterdam's Jewish quarter and the void left by the woman who jumped into the Seine can never be filled again because they are but a reflection of the hollowness that resides at the core of modern society. In Clamence's eyes, today's men are cowardly and two-faced: they may claim the right to judge others but they make absolutely sure that, beforehand, everyone else's guilt has been established.

The Fall's ending also provides another, but this time pessimistic, twist to Nietzsche's concept of the 'eternal return' which Camus had already "explore[d] in [...] *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which the repetitive nature of existence comes to represent life's absurdity [...]. Yet Sisyphus does not give up and continues to roll [...] the stone up the [mountain]" (Wikipedia Contributors 2019).

And, in *The Stranger*, Meursault had courageously defied the priest and insisted that he would be glad to start life over again if only: "in that other life [...] [he] would be able to remember this life" (Camus 1946; Camus 2006, 211; translation changed by AvdH). However, Clamence's cowardice is limitless because *he* would never take the plunge and therefore he will go around and around but always stop short of breaking through this circle. Camus imputes the same circular behaviour to his readers. He refers to Clamence's and his anonymous interlocutor's behaviour as emblematic in the hope that their lack of courage resonates since these readers are viewed as equally unwilling to fill in the blanks, look behind their backs, and recognize their cowardice when it comes to helping those in distress. These are also the same people who have continued to turn a blind eye to Europe's hideous colonial past and its treatment of the Jews.

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