

Amsterdam as a source of symbols for Camus' *The Fall**

Albert Camus (1913-60) wrote, among other works, three novels, known in English as *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947) and *The Fall* (1956). The first two are better known in English than the third, and yet the third in many ways is the most interesting. All are first-person narratives and all protest against a world in which people insist on judging and condemning others, in other words against legalized killing. But there the resemblance ends.

The Stranger is an account of how a young man in Algiers, with no ambitions, in a dead-end job, drifts into an acquaintance with a pimp and kills an Arab in self-defence. He is tried and condemned to death, not so much for killing as because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral. He learns to love the world even though it is absurd. *The Plague* is the diary of a doctor who takes part in the fight against an epidemic of bubonic plague in the Algerian city of Oran. In both cases the narrative is straightforward and there is little imagery. Perhaps, in *The Stranger*, a minor figure, an old man who seems to hate his dog but is upset when it dies, can stand for the main character who says "everybody knows life isn't worth living" but who learns to love it just before he is guillotined. In *The Plague*, the epidemic represents all the bloodthirsty insanity that swept through Europe in the 1930's and 1940's.

The Fall is very different. The narrator is a former Parisian lawyer, who believed he was superior to the rest of humanity and despised it. Then something happened to reveal that he was flawed, and a lifelong battle began in his mind between admission and denial of the fact. He has ended up frequenting a sailor's bar called the Mexico City, on the Zeedijk in Amsterdam, where he confesses himself at length to habitués and tourists alike, then urges them to make a similar confession which will restore his conviction that he is superior. For he fears that if he is not fit to judge others, he will be judged.

The narration is not straightforward; the narrator reveals only gradually the burden of guilt that he wishes to admit to. He is halfway through his tale before he brings himself to tell of the event that shattered his self-image: he once, when crossing the Pont-Royal in Paris, failed to prevent a young woman from drowning.

I had already gone some fifty yards when I heard the sound, which, despite the distance, seemed dreadfully loud in the midnight silence, of a body striking the water. I stopped short, but without turning around. Almost at once I heard a cry, repeated several times, and going downstream; then it suddenly stopped. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable. I wanted to run and yet didn't stir. I was trembling, I believe from cold and shock. I told myself that I had to be quick and I felt an irresistible weakness steal over me. I have forgotten what I thought then. "Too late, too far..." or something like that. I stood motionless and listened. Then slowly, in the rain, I walked away. I didn't report it to anybody (70).¹

After that, the narrator moved to Amsterdam, where, in order to handle the guilt aroused in him by the drowning, he wraps himself in symbols drawn from his surroundings. Even his name and address are symbolic. He claims his name is Jean-Baptiste Clamence, but soon admits it isn't. Obviously we are to think of St. John the Baptist, the voice crying in the wilderness, *vox clamantis in deserto*. Not only that, he lives

in the Jewish quarter, or what was called so until our Hitlerian brothers made room. What a clean-up! Seventy-five thousand Jews deported or assassinated; that is a real vacuum-cleaning.(...) I live on the site of

one of the greatest crimes in history
(22).

Clamence offers us no comment on his name, and he doesn't even give that of the neighbourhood, but every Dutchman knows: it is, aptly enough, the Jordaan. But there is no reason why the listener to Clamence's tale, who is French like him, would know it. One has to check out the reference and discover what is behind it. It seems that Clamence is thus demonstrating, at his listener's expense, a central belief of his: man possesses an enigmatic double nature, and in order to understand him, you must be willing to check out what is going on behind your back. (With a written text, likewise, the reader must explore the realities that go beyond the confines of the narration). But we do not, of course, wish to find out about ourselves or others, so we turn our backs on whatever is inconvenient. Clamence turned his back on the incident on the Pont-Royal, both literally and figuratively:

What? That woman? Oh, I don't know.
Really I don't know. The next day, and the
days following, I didn't read the papers (71).

The Amsterdam bar Clamence hangs out in is frequented by pimps, prostitutes and crooks. However, he declares that they are not what they seem:

Well, these gentlemen over here live off those ladies' work. All of them, moreover, both males and females, are very middle class creatures, and come here out of habit, mythomania or stupidity. Through too much or too little imagination, in short. Occasionally, these gentlemen play with a knife or a revolver but don't get the idea that they take it seriously. The part they play requires it (7).

He adds: "I find them more moral than the others, those who kill in the bosom of the family, by attrition" (*ibid*). In other words, the pimps claim to be immoral but behind that facade they are bourgeois, while the bourgeois claim to be moral but behind that facade they are ruthless.

The bar yields another image of the hidden side of things. Clamence points to a spot on the wall over the bar owner's head, and recalls that

on the back wall, above his head, that empty rectangle marks the place where a painting was removed. Indeed, a real and particularly interesting masterpiece hung there (5).

Where the masterpiece got to, Clamence reveals towards the end of his story. He takes the listener to his apartment, and there in a cupboard is the painting. It is the left-hand panel of van Eyck's triptych *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb (Het Lam Gods)*. The triptych can be seen in St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, but as Clamence recalls, the left panel was stolen in 1934 and never recovered. What the tourist sees is in fact "an excellent copy" (128).

Clamence calls the panel "The Just Judges." That is in fact the subject of one of the sections the panel is divided into: they are one of the groups of people worshipping the Lamb. St. John the Baptist is depicted on the back of that part of the panel, as well as in the upper row of the central panel, next to God. Moreover, if you go to the cathedral and look in the chapel where the triptych used to be, you see a blank wall; the painting has been moved to a glassed-in area near the west door, so that you can see the back as well.

These facts, like the name of Clamence's neighbourhood, are very relevant to his story, but again they remain hidden from the listener - and from the reader. It is part of the subtlety and the complexity of this narration, so simple at first glance, that certain details are not stated but are hidden. They are part of the way in which Clamence controls his listener, by showing he is more cultured, and on the level of the text they are a means whereby Camus demonstrates the complex and partly hidden nature of reality.

Indeed he asserts that there is no border between reality and dream. In a poetically charged passage, which owes something to the vision of Holland as a dream paradise in Baudelaire's poem *L'invitation au voyage*, he walks through the streets with his listener and denies that the passers-by are ordinary people, or even that they are there:

Are you like everybody else, do you take these good people for a tribe of accountants and merchants, counting their coin with their chances of eternal life, whose only lyricism

consists in occasionally, without doffing their broad-brimmed hats, taking anatomy lessons? You are wrong. True, they walk next to us, and yet, note where their heads are: in that fog compounded of neon, gin and mint emanating from the green and red electric signs. Holland is a dream, sir, a dream of gold and smoke, smokier by day, more gilded by night. And night and day this dream is peopled with Lohengrins like these, dreamily passing by on their black bicycles with the tall handle-bars, funereal swans who float without interruption throughout the land, around the seas, along the canals. They dream with their heads in the copper-coloured clouds and go round and round; they pray, sleepwalkers in the fog's gilded incense; they are no longer here. They have left for Java, the far away island, thousands of kilometres away. They pray to those grimacing gods from Indonesia with which they have decorated their shop windows, and which at this moment are floating above us before alighting like sumptuous monkeys on the signs and the stepped roofs, to remind these nostalgic colonisers 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 (13-14).

In this passage one function of the style is to capture both sides of Holland's past, in as succinct a manner as possible: Rembrandt and the Dutch East Indies company, the Dutch reputation as both hard-nosed realists and wistful dreamers. But we must not forget that it is only on the surface of the text and through the voice of the narrator that these elements of Holland's past become distinct realities, and only there do they create an evident and coherent pattern. Without the narrator's purposeful intervention, the metonymic relationship between the images and

Holland's glorious and inglorious past would not become evident. The passage may thus be seen as "a perfect copy" of Holland's past, in the same manner that the van Eyck panel presently displayed in Ghent's St. Bavo Cathedral can be seen as a perfect copy of the panel hidden in Clamence's cupboard.

But the other function of this, as of all the lyrical or frenzied outbursts, is to reveal that Clamence, spurred on by gin and bad faith, is denying reality. The romantic image is immediately followed by another, no less literary, but not at all golden:

Have you noticed that Amsterdam's concentric canals resemble the circles of hell? The bourgeois hell, naturally, peopled with bad dreams. When one comes from the outside, as one passes through these circles, life, and hence its crimes become denser, darker. Here we are in the last circle. The circle of the ... (14).

His interlocutor immediately recognizes the reference to Dante's *Inferno* and the traitors' circle; but the fact that the sentence is left incomplete provides us with a hint of that other layer of verbal reality that he requires us to explore, because for Clamence nothing is simple and straightforward. One must dig deeper and deeper until finally one arrives at "the heart of things" (*ibid*).

He develops this image when he and his listener visit Marken. On the shore of the Zuiderzee he exclaims:

Look to our left at that heap of ashes that here they call a sand dune, the grey dyke on our right, the livid beach at our feet and in front of us the sea, the colour of diluted dirty water from the laundry, and the vast sky with the pale water reflected in it [sic]. Really a soggy hell. Nothing but horizontal lines, no brightness, space is colourless, life is dead (72).

This place may be taken as a physical correlative of Clamence's own mind. He has chosen to hide in this place because he can keep his mind in a fog. He contrasts it with the Mediterranean (97-98), with its clear skies and unhypocritical people. We can tell that he could never bear to see himself with such clarity.

He gives the IJsselmeer its old name on purpose: it is the opposite of the Mediterranean, which for a European is the true southern sea.

Indeed, Amsterdam and the Zuiderzee are not only a good place for a personality like Clamence's: they reflect his personality. He says of the area that

The newspaper readers and fornicators [i.e. modern men] can go no further. They come from all over Europe and come to a halt around the inner sea, on the drab beach (15).

These terms recall the polar lake reached at the end of another unsatisfactory inner voyage, Gide's *Le Voyage d'Urien* (1893). "It was the end, you could go no further." A critic has called Gide's self, as it is here presented, circumscribed, lonely and empty.²

Under the golden misty illusion, then, lurks something far grimmer, namely the complex and never pure nature of humanity. Clamence constantly speaks of (and demonstrates) the cagey subtlety, the cynical complexity but also the blatant gruesomeness of human behaviour. For example, he points out a house:

Charming house, isn't it? The two heads you see up there are those of Negro slaves. A shop sign. The house belonged to a slave trader. Ah! In those days, one didn't hide one's game. They had guts, they announced: "There, this is my business, I trade in slaves, I sell back flesh." Can you imagine someone to-day letting it be known publicly that such is his profession? (44)

Clamence is not condemning Holland's past commercial practices, however: he is speaking of the present. He wishes to stress that modern man is not morally superior but that he has simply become more hypocritical and clever at hiding his true occupations. We cloak our motives with good intentions, we turn our backs on whatever is hideous or vicious. Camus himself is here making an attack on Sartre and his oft-stated belief that one is always responsible for one's actions, asserting that the latter's notion of human psychology is far too simplistic.³ Of course we are involved, but we also spend the majority of our time and effort in hiding our responsibility or looking the other way while piously proclaiming our

innocence. Let us provide another example. Some time later Clamence points to another Amsterdam landmark:

Why, a few streets from here, there is a museum called Our Lord in the Attic. At the time, they had to put their catacombs under the roof timbers. What do you expect, their basements are flooded here (115).

The historical origins of this Catholic church, "Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder," are well known. During the Reformation, it permitted Catholics to hear Mass in secret. Clamence refers to this landmark to establish a somewhat spurious link with Roman times and its persecution of Christians but, more importantly, it allows him to highlight modern man's attitude:

But to-day - set your mind at rest - their Lord is neither in the attic nor in the basement. They have hoisted him onto a judge's bench, in the secret of their hearts, and they smite, they judge above all, they judge in their name. He spoke softly to the adulteress: "Neither do I condemn thee!" but that doesn't matter; they condemn without absolving anyone (*ibid*).

Of course the real Christ is *not* in their hearts. Modern man simply uses his Ten Commandments to judge and condemn others. He has no intention of leading a truly virtuous life; on the contrary, laws are but grist for his mill, to be used to better grind up others and exonerate himself.

One last quotation, to bring out the reason why the idea that Amsterdam is an unreal city is not in fact a rosy idea. As so often, he is proposing a self-analysis, but he speaks again of the Dutch:

Thus the surface of all my virtues had a less imposing underside... To be sure, I occasionally pretended to take life seriously. But very soon the frivolity of seriousness struck me and I merely went on playing my role as well as I could... In short there's no need of going on, you have already grasped that I was like my Dutchmen who are here without being here: I was absent at the moment when I took up the most room. I have never been really sincere... (85-88).

Clamence's sincerity is a game, a form of shadow-boxing. His behaviour is designed to feign, to impress, to persuade, while in the meantime he is really absent. The image of the Dutch as a people "with their heads in the clouds", at once down-to-earth burghers and dreamers of far-away tropical Indonesia, therefore suits Clamence perfectly. It brings us to our final question: what to make of his use of the Lowlands?

For, as we said above, Clamence wraps himself in symbols drawn from his surroundings; he no more describes the surroundings than he honestly analyzes himself. The reader constantly stumbles over differences between the real world and Clamence's version of them. Most of Amsterdam's inhabitants do not move around in a dream (13-14). At one point he says he does not cross any bridges on his route between the Jordaan and the Zeedijk; in fact he could not help doing so. To say, as he does, that Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder is in the attic because in the basement it would be flooded (115), is silly. Perhaps it is simply easier to hide in attics (one thinks of Anne Frank, of course). He says the house that sheltered Descartes has been turned into a lunatic asylum, but it certainly wasn't one at the time when this novel takes place. He speaks of hearing foghorns in downtown Amsterdam; you cannot. He speaks of a tide on the Zuiderzee; since it became the IJsselmeer there is no tide. At Marken he speaks of a beach and sand dunes (72); there are neither (the dunes are on Holland's west coast). There is certainly no beach in Amsterdam (15).

We can see *The Fall* as a palimpsest or, better yet, a hologram. What Camus has succeeded in doing is to use real places - Amsterdam's lay-out in a series of concentric circles, as well as its canals and its people, along with a real painting stolen from St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent - as a means of bringing out man's multi-faceted, complex and treacherous nature.

However, *The Fall* requires us not only to have a thorough knowledge of Dutch life and culture, but also to integrate these aspects with the multiple intertextual games that Clamence indulges in. Amsterdam's concentric circles remind Clamence of Dante's *Inferno*, the Zeedijk reminds him of Hell's last circle. His name has blatant Biblical overtones and his description of the Dutch draws on Rembrandt and Baudelaire.

The stolen panel from van Eyck's triptych forces the reader to deal with multiple perceptual and teleological questions. First of all, the panel now resides behind a closed cupboard door in Clamence's apartment. In other words, the real panel is usually invisible and only Clamence, his listener, the "gorilla-like" bar owner and we the readers "know" of its whereabouts. Instead what most people get to see when they visit Saint Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent is "a perfect copy", a simulacrum. This implies that what human beings show each other of themselves is also but a fake, a "perfect" copy, and hardly ever "the real thing". In addition, there is the empty rectangle which is displayed on the bar wall above and behind "the gorilla". It refers at the same time to the "gorilla's" mind or soul, which is a blank, to the real panel hidden in Clamence's cupboard, to the triptych in Ghent, and to man's real intentions, which so often remain enigmatic. Let us add that on the back of "The Just Judges" there is another painting, a portrait of the man who commissioned the triptych - but in Clamence's cupboard he is hidden. Since we can only ever see one side of the panel, this man is in the same relationship to the front of the painting as the listener is to Clamence, the narrator, and as in turn Clamence, who is only "a voice on paper", is to the "tangible" and "visible" author, Albert Camus.

Yet Clamence is an essential guide both for the invisible and inaudible listener and for us, the readers. In textual terms, he may be a disembodied entity, but we are supposed to accept him as a real person who is living in a real city, Amsterdam. Yet however real Amsterdam and the Low Countries may be, it is what Clamence points to and reveals for us that is important. It is not just what we see and know that matters, but also what remains hidden and requires Clamence's guiding voice and interpretation. Ultimately, what Camus is proposing through his intermediary is a much more sophisticated, complex, involved and slippery conception of human behaviour than what he sees as Sartre's somewhat simplistic notion of commitment. Camus clearly implies that we must look beyond the man's rhetoric and posturing and investigate what is not given, "absent", and hence remains unstated in people's stances.

In conclusion, there are always things going on behind our back and enigmas are an integral part of man's attitude and behaviour. If this means that there is no such thing as a complete, definitive picture of

reality, so be it. But it also means that we are obliged to take into account the absent, "other" unmentioned aspects, and that we should always look behind our back, behind the picture, to see what the reverse side looks like. Otherwise we will always be limited exclusively to the obverse side of life, and what is obverse is so obvious as to be superficial, and that approach leads us straight into a hall of mirrors. Camus wants us to do more, namely to focus also on the seemingly absent and to maintain the distinction between the real and the fake and deliberately include all sides of the picture.

NOTES

* We thank Henry Schogt of the University of Toronto for his valuable suggestions.

¹ A. Camus: *The Fall*, tr. Justin O'Brien, new York: Vintage Books, 1956. We have modified this translation in places.

² Gide: *Romans, récits, soties, oeuvres lyriques*, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1958, p. 64. The critic is Germaine Brée: *André Gide, l'insaisissable Protée*, Paris: Les Belles-Lettres, 1953, p. 55.

³ Some critics take the opposite view, namely that Camus feels Sartre and his circle are guilty of bad faith, finding devious reasons to judge and condemn others even as they claim to be confessing their own errors. And indeed, in his diary he calls them judge-penitents, (cf. for example P. Lécollier in *Dictionnaire des littératures de langue française*, Paris: Bordas, 1984, 1:361). Yet Camus so obviously enjoys the lyrical crazy passages he puts in Clamence's mouth that he is surely not distancing himself completely from his character's views. They are at least illiberal reactionary selfish feelings we all have to fight down.