

Jean-Baptiste Clamence on the Bridge:
Imagining A Spiritually Informed Literary Criticism (Camus' *The Fall*)

(URAM Conference, Toronto, 7-10 August 2013)

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Introduction

In his article, *The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism*, Dennis Taylor laments, “We no longer know how to discuss wrong turnings and right turnings, achieved insights, persistent blindness, breakthrough moments.” (5) He continues, “Do we have a language to talk about the delicacy of spiritual conversation, ... to talk about spiritual quest.” (14) At the heart of Christian spirituality we find transformation, the conversion experience so poignantly described in the autobiographies of St. Augustine, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and Saint Teresa of Avila. In this paper we analyze a confessional novel where the narrator/protagonist has undergone a transformative experience (albeit negative): *The Fall* by Albert Camus. In Camus’ novel Jean-Baptiste Clamence (the narrator/protagonist) undergoes a crisis of selfhood which is akin to a negative transformation—an inversion of the pattern of spiritual transformation from sin to grace. This crisis occurs in a secularized world emptied of God. Although faith and religious belief may no longer be an option, this is not a world devoid of judgment.

Our analysis comprises three parts. In the first part we analyze the novel with an emphasis on Clamence’s “conversion” experience. In the second part we consider critical reception of the novel and, in particular, how critics have dealt with the events on the bridge (Pont Royal) and Clamence’s response to them in terms of self-abasement and guilt. The third part of our analysis is deductive, less conventional, and more exploratory. We begin with

the proposition that spirituality is akin to a paradigm or worldview.¹ It is a 'way of being' in the world with a concomitant 'way of seeing/experiencing' existence. Once the conceptual and propositional contours of a spiritual worldview are established, we move to their deductive application to novel. Our focus is Clamence's transformative experience on the Pont Royal (the dramatic center of the Camus' novel) and the novel's portrayal of a self in crisis.

Part I: Synopsis

Clamence before and after the fall

Something has happened to Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the narrator/protagonist. He is no longer the man he once was. Who was he? What has he become? And why? As readers, we encounter these questions simultaneously: the linear narrative alternates between recalling the man he was and sermonizing on the man he has become. Although once content with his life, a personal crisis has stripped him of this confidence. Where he was once self-assured in the knowledge that others viewed him as an honorable man, he is now tormented by guilt. He has fallen. He has undergone an unsettling transformation. In telling his story, Clamence recounts the particulars of the crisis (what provoked it), but, more importantly, he explores how the crisis has altered his conception of himself and the world. Moreover, by telling his story he seeks to draw his listeners into the world of the altered self. We suspect that should we come to see the world as Clamence now does, we would become his accomplices. (73)

We will begin with the enunciative frame: who is speaking, to whom, and to what purpose? Clamence, a French expatriate, is speaking to a fellow countryman in an Amsterdam bar called *Mexico City*. Although they are strangers to each other, Clamence is eager to relate his tale--perhaps too eager. His manner is obsequious. He immediately identifies his

¹ Our initial impulse was to avoid an interpretive approach to spirituality that was skewed towards essentially *religious* concerns: questions of dogma, symbolism, imagery, rituals, and morality. Demonstrating the residual presence of religious symbols, imagery or archetypes in the secularized space of this novel would not be our objective.

interlocutor as a fellow bourgeois, a “cultured bourgeois.” (9) When Clamence labels his interlocutor, a “Sadducee,” he is pleased to note that his companion is familiar with the term, and more generally, with “Scriptures.” Things are looking up: Clamence shares a common cultural and religious heritage with his interlocutor. Their first encounter is filled with small talk. We learn that Clamence lives in the Jewish quarter where the memory of Hitler’s extermination of the Jews is still fresh. He notes the similarity between the circles of Hell and Amsterdam’s system of concentric canals, which he qualifies as a “middle-class hell.” (14) Most important, we learn that Clamence was once a lawyer, but now identifies himself as “judge-penitent.” (8)

When they next meet, Clamence continues to feign interest in his bar companion. However, their exchanges are one-sided. Rarely, do we hear the voice of his companion, and when we do, it is usually in the form of a question that has been recapitulated by Clamence. So it is with the first sentence of the second section that begins, “What is a judge-penitent?” (17) From the preceding section we are aware that the term judge-penitent is akin to a profession. This is how Clamence frames it when he states, “If you want to know, I was a lawyer before coming here. Now, I am a judge-penitent.”(8) Clamence, the bourgeois lawyer, a champion of noble causes, has been transformed into a judge-penitent.

Clamence’s fall occurs in two stages. One night, as he is returning home, he witnesses the suicide of a young woman on the Pont Royal. (69) Then “two or three years later” he begins to imagine laughter coming from behind him while crossing another bridge². (69) The two events, although separated by several years, are connected in Clamence’s mind. Perhaps most important, they are joined together in the the narrative. The narrator reorders the chronology of events to bring the laughter episode³ into proximity with the suicide on the Pont Royal:

² Pont des Arts.

³ In point of fact, Clamence has already described the laughter (39). But here he reveals for the first time that it was related to the suicide on the bridge several years prior.

So here goes. That particular night in November, two or three years before the evening when I thought I heard laughter behind me, I was returning to the Left Bank and my home by way of the Pont Royal. (69)

What happened that evening on the bridge? As Clamence passes a young woman dressed in black, something 'stirs' him.⁴ He hesitates for a moment then walks on. He is about fifty yards away when he hears the sound of a body striking water followed by several cries. He wants to run but can't. He is trembling. An "irresistible weakness" steals over him. Ultimately, he does nothing.

Sometime after the events on the bridge Clamence is struck "all at once" with the suspicion that he "wasn't so admirable." (77) He describes the experience as akin to an animal tamer "bleeding" in front of a pack of wild animals. (78) In this helpless state he fears that he will be devoured by his contemporaries. He becomes "distrustful" of them. More specifically, he is distrustful of their judgment:

In short, the moment I grasped that there was something to judge in me, I realized that there was in them an irresistible vocation for judgment. Yes, they were there as before, *but they were laughing*. (78) [Emphasis added.]

It is significant to note that Clamence did not relate the episode on the bridge to anyone prior to the laughter. If he feared the judgment of his peers, it is not because he has revealed his secret. Nor does he intimate that he felt the judgment of a higher power. In effect, and somewhat belatedly, *the two episodes on the bridge have produced a moment of heightened awareness*. By not acting in a totally admirable manner, Clamence begins to suspect that he may not be an entirely admirable person. If this is the case, then his grounds for feeling superior have fallen away. Moreover, if this is apparent to him, it may be apparent to others; this opens the way to judgment. Inner awareness has become outer vulnerability.

⁴ "The back of her neck, cool and damp between her dark hair and coat collar, *stirred* me." (70) [Emphasis added.]

By his own admission, Clamence has undergone a profound change. The change is so profound that he has no difficulty evoking the spiritual categories of old versus new self. In the ensuing monologue, Clamence suggests that he is able to see himself as he truly is. He is keenly aware of his failings: his deep-seeded need to feel superior, his inability to find intimacy in his relationships with women, his lack of courage. He would have us believe that he is a clear-sighted, at times severe, judge of his own character. His confession of personal failings does not appear to be completely disingenuous. But the new self does not bring peace. Using the language of the discourse of spiritual transformation, one would say that Clamence has been “awakened.” But he has not been awakened into light; rather, he is overwhelmed by darkness.

Part II: Critical reception

Selfhood, crisis and guilt: Clamence as split subject

Camus' novel portrays Clamence as a self in crisis. Although the nature of the crisis has been the subject of numerous interpretations, most critics would agree that Clamence has experienced a doubling or splitting of the self. The most fundamental split is the split in his life that marks Clamence before and after his fall. What Clamence discovers in the aftermath of his fall is troubling. The self is no longer unified; it is no longer in harmony. William Duvall has noted, “Clamence refers to his profession as double, to the code by which he lived as double, to the Dutch as double (“They are here and elsewhere”, p.13), to the human as double.” (Duvall, 549) Quinn has noted that this “doubleness” is synonymous with “duplicity.” (Quinn, 96) There is a discrepancy between the self as presented to the world (noble and admirable) and the inner self, which is indifferent, selfish, (Camus, 85) and judgmental (Camus, 25, 117). Franco speaks of Clamence's inability “to line up his social image with his authentic self.” (Franco, 454)

It is generally assumed that Clamence has fallen from innocence to guilt. (Quinn, 94) By his own admission Clamence is “guilty” of pride, duplicity, and selfishness. He is also culpable (in his own eyes) of a certain naiveté during his period of innocence. He would have us

believe that he is beyond forgiveness, or more precisely, that forgiveness is no longer possible—such is the human condition. Most importantly, he cannot escape judgment. He states, “The judgment you are passing on others eventually snaps back in your face, causing some damage.” (137)

A number of critics have noted that the crisis Clamence experiences is out of proportion to its apparent cause. For at least one critic of Camus’ novel, this renders Clamence “unconvincing” as a character. Bronner, reiterating Podhoretz’s critique⁵, notes, “there is no material reason given why he has thrown away his successful legal practice and comfortable life in exchange for a seedy existence in a tawdry bar.” (Bronner, 120)

Most critics would agree that the “dramatic center” (Ellison, 346-47) of the novel is the suicide on the Pont Royal. The laughter that intrudes upon Clamence’s life, shattering his confidence, dividing his life, and transforming him into a judge-penitent, points to the events on the bridge. On the other hand, the fact that Clamence committed no crime and that his behavior, although far from being admirable, did not constitute a breach of public or private morality, has led a number of critics to suggest that his feelings of guilt are misplaced. In effect, these critics argue, his confession is an exercise in unjustified self-abasement.

Brian Fitch in his book-length study, *The Fall: A Matter of Guilt*, suggests that Camus has depicted a subject in the thralls of “excessive self-awareness.” (Fitch, 52) He states:

He [Clamence] mistakes an ontological condition—that is, a state of consciousness brought about by self-reflection—for a moral condition, that of deceiving oneself with regard to one’s true motivation. In other words, he takes the split consciousness (what the French conveniently refer to as *dédoublement*) for moral duplicity and insincerity. (52)

Fitch goes so far as to suggest:

⁵ Podhoretz, N. 1986. “Camus and his Critics.” In his *The Bloody Crossroads: Where Literature and Politics Meet*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

... the doubling-up of himself that Clamence experiences, bringing about an impression of loss of harmony in his relationship with himself, so that he no longer feels comfortable with himself, *is the inevitable product of any form of introspection*, for as the consciousness reflects upon itself, it inevitably experiences a fundamental lack of coincidence with itself. (52) [Emphasis added.]

Clamence, according to Fitch, is being “far too hard upon himself in his self-condemnation.” (52)

In a similar vein, Philip Quinn has argued that Clamence’s offense is the “ordinary vice” of “pride.” Quinn, while not discounting the existentialists’ depiction of a “hellish world” leading to a kind of nihilism, argues that the problem of pride may be more amenable to solution than Clamence’s tortured monologue would suggest:

I am instead thinking of the modest beliefs that human pride can be humbled, or at least kept in check, without divine chastisement and that acknowledging guilt in ourselves need not render us merciless toward others. If a post-Christian culture can mobilize such resources as these, it may well prove strong enough to resist the seductions of the false prophets of nihilism. (Quinn, 103)

In a more nuanced interpretation of what has befallen the protagonist of *The Fall*, Maurice Blanchot contends that Clamence’s monologue is essentially an escape (*une fuite*). But it is a rational escape as it leads him to *guilt* as a type of certainty. “His confession is but a calculation. His guilty man’s story is made of the hope of believing himself to be guilty, because a true crime would be a certainty in which he could anchor his life, a solid point of reference that would allow him to limit his course.” (Blanchot, 230) [Translation by Ellison, 331] In Blanchot’s reading of the novel, Clamence is not so much fallen *as falling*. He is a subject in free fall. Desperately grasping for an anchor (*a repère*) that he can latch on to in order to arrest his fall, he finds consolation in the imaginative act of pinpointing the moment he began to fall from innocence. (Blanchot, 234) “Nous préférons être coupable plutôt que tourmentés sans faute.” [We prefer to be guilty rather than tormented without fault.] According to this interpretation, Camus seems to be postulating free fall as our shared existential condition. Guilt is something that we cling to in order to arrest our descent.

Because we are unable to identify a transgression, we substitute for it the moment when our fall from innocence appears on the horizon of consciousness. The two become synonymous. It is, therefore, futile to search for the transgression at the origins of guilt (for example, in Clamence's case, the events on the bridge), since guilt is nothing more than a salvation strategy (now secularized) designed to stop the dizziness (*vertige*) that plagues the human condition.

Ellison, in concord with Blanchot's analysis, has probed deeper into the enigma of guilt that is at the heart of the narrative in order to conclude that the suicide on the bridge, was, in effect, a non-event. According to Ellison, to read guilt into the events that evening is to misread the evidence presented by the text. A literal reading of the text suggests that critics have been too eager to assign guilt to Clamence, by combining elements into a "coherent picture" when there is none:

The most apparent effect of the episode is to inculcate Clamence, to condemn him for lack of action. He has seen a woman, heard a suspiciously revealing noise, and has not shown the slightest sign of altruistic behavior. He has allowed a suicide to occur, the critics tell us. But what is the textual origin of this "death"? A literal reading of the passage that respects the evidence of Camus's wording reveals only a series of juxtaposed perceptions: the protagonist sees a woman who appeals to him sensually, hears the sound of a body falling, followed by a cry. The rhetoric of Clamence and the logic of representation cause us to combine these elements in a coherent picture: we conclude quickly that it is the woman seen on the bridge who falls, and that her death is Clamence's crime of passivity. The text is persuasive enough to render all this believable and pathetic. (Ellison, p. 346-7)

According to this post-modernist reading, the search for meaning can only lead to enigma or absence. We cannot know. Clamence cannot know. Ellison contrasts this with the prototypical narrative of hellish descent, Dante's *Inferno*:

Like Dante's Hell, the narrative of *La Chute* is constructed concentrically around a point that supports the entire verbal edifice. However, whereas the movement of the pilgrim and his guide in the *Inferno* is that of a downward spiral toward the figure of

Satan, and therefore toward a direct physical confrontation with the embodiment of Evil, *La Chute* is best described as a series of circles receding outward from an origin which is subsequently lost from view, much like the immediately disappearing pattern made by a pebble thrown into water. The pebble itself, or cause, is quickly forgotten in favor of its effect—the rippling waves it produces. (Ellison, 345)

Finally, Solomon has argued that the problem is not “pride” or Clamence’s obsessive desire to feel superior, but rather “resentful” pride. Solomon states, “In the resentful world one takes pride (if that is the word) not in winning but in bringing the other low. The fall is not due to a tragic flaw at all but rather to conniving and self-deception, in this exceptional case the conniving of Clamence’s later self against the former.” (Solomon, 48) According to this interpretation the fault lies in the doubling or splitting of the subject. Moreover, Solomon suggests that resentment is the unwarranted, but logical, result of “comparisons and contrasts to perfection,” “what Nietzsche called the ‘shadows of God.’” (Solomon, 53) In other words, Clamence is at war with himself because of God. It is the “the comparison and contrast with either God or Christ or the *Übermensch* [that] renders us pathetic, ‘human-all-too-human.’” (Solomon, 52-53)

Interpretations that acknowledge the crisis of the divided self, but argue that guilt cannot not be the issue warrant thoughtful consideration. In his analysis of *The Fall*, René Girard has argued that the work is essentially an exploration of the problem of judgment. He states, “The real question is no longer ‘who is innocent, who is guilty?,’ but ‘why do we, all of us, have to keep judging and being judged?’” (Girard, 33-4) Assuming that Girard is correct, it may be that these ‘merciful’ interpretations, which seek to find a way out of guilt and judgment, may be in tune with a shift that was occurring in Camus’ thought. In the words of Girard, the problem is no longer the “iniquity of the judges” (Girard, 20), which was at the core of Camus’ *L’Étranger*, but the human penchant for judgment itself.

Shame: an alternative interpretation of the events on the bridge

Although these generous readings may correspond to a certain evolution in Camus’ thought concerning the problem of judgment, they are incomplete and misleading as interpretations of *The Fall* because they direct us away from the focal point of the narrative.

Earlier, we described the scene on the bridge as the dramatic center of the novel. Either what happened on the bridge is significant, or Camus is simply using 'the turning' as a trope, a plot device that structures the narrative without any bearing upon the crisis of selfhood portrayed in the work. It is our contention that what happens on the bridge is significant. In this respect we disagree with the interpretive tradition that is inclined to disregard the events on the bridge. However, and in agreement with a fundamental insight of these interpretations, we do not believe that the events on the bridge point unequivocally to traditional guilt. In other words, we do not believe that Clamence's fall may be attributed to feelings of guilt associated with the suicide on the bridge. Something else is at stake.

At the center of Camus' novel one finds a disjointed, and apparently disconnected, series of auricular events. Clamence *hears* a "body striking water"; Clamence *hears* "a cry, repeated several times"; Clamence *hears* "laughter behind [him] me." Although the laughter occurs several years after the splash and the cry, the narrator has no difficulty associating the laughter with the earlier auricular events. The three events are all of a piece. It is for this reason that we cannot know precisely when the fall began. Did it begin on the Pont Royal with the suicide or did it commence several years later on the other bridge when he heard the laughter? In any case, the significant event is the moment Camus' narrator becomes conscious that his life is rift by a *before* (innocence) and an *after*. Clamence appears to suggest that the 'after' is guilt. Indeed, this line of interpretation has dominated critical interpretation of the novel (including those generous interpretations that would dismiss it). It is our contention that notwithstanding the narrator's obsessive ruminations on guilt, Camus is portraying a subject whose experience resembles *shame* more than guilt. In other words, Camus has crafted a protagonist who *postulates guilt, but is experiencing shame*. One of the tasks of a more spiritual interpretation of the novel will be to parse out the relationship between shame and guilt in Clamence's self-justificatory response to the events on the bridge.

As early as 1961 two critics noted that the emotion experienced by Clamence resembled shame more than to guilt. (De Jong, 247; Stourzh, 46) Moreover, on two occasions, the narrative itself draws our attention to the problem of shame when Clamence states, "I don't

know how to name the odd feeling that comes over me. Isn't it shame, perhaps? Tell me, *mon cher compatriote*, doesn't shame sting a little? It does? Well, it's probably shame, then or one of those silly emotions that have to do with honor." (68-9) Toward the end of his monologue he states, "I stand before all humanity recapitulating my shames without losing sight of the effect I am producing, and saying: "I was the lowest of the low." Then imperceptibly I pass from the "I" to the "we." (140) It is important to note, however, that the narrator does not evoke shame in relation to the experience on the bridge.

In his article, "The Unforgivable Sin: An Interpretation of *The Fall*," Stourzh laments the fact that our culture often confuses guilt and shame. Strictly speaking, guilt occurs when "standards of conduct" have been "breached." (Stourzh, 45) Shame, according to Stourzh, may be a "subjective reaction to the breach" but it may also be a subjective reaction to the "non-fulfillment of standards, moral, intellectual, or aesthetic which we recognize as valid, which we desire to live up to." (45) Anthony O'Hear in his "Guilt and Shame as Moral Concepts," makes a similar distinction when he notes:

In contrast with guilt, shame is not a notion whose central connotations are legal or moral. Although we can feel shame at doing something illegal or immoral, we can equally easily be ashamed of a bad piece of work, or of a social gaffe, or of saying something foolish, or of failing in a supererogatory ideal. (O'Hear, 76)

In their book, *Shame: A Faith Perspective*, Albers and Clements reiterate the distinction in language that perfectly characterizes Clamence in his fallen state:

Whereas guilt may be characterized phenomenologically as a behavioral violation of one's value system, *shame is an ontological violation of one's essentiality or identity as a person.* (Albers, 22) [Emphasis added.]

They continue:

Shame results in feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and hopelessness as one feels judged by others and judges oneself as of no value, consequence, purpose, worth, or significance. The self views the self from the shame perspective and like a

malignancy the shame metastasizes to permeate the entire person, physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.” (Albers, 22)

Drawing upon research in human psychology, Albers differentiates two types of shame: *discretion* shame and *disgrace* shame. Discretion (or discretionary) shame is designed to protect the boundaries of the self. He notes, “Its function is to establish appropriate boundaries in order to guard against invasive or intrusive actions which can violate the dignity and integrity of another human being.” (Albers, 8) Discretionary shame is designed to insure “a modicum of modesty, privacy, propriety, and prudence” in human relations. (Ibid.)

With reference to Carl Schneider’s work, *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy*, Albers and Clements note:

If discretion shame sustains the personal and social ordering of the world, *disgrace shame is a painful experience of the disintegration of one's world*. A break occurs in the self’s relationship with itself and/or others. An awkward, uncomfortable space opens up in the world. The self is no longer whole, but divided. It feels less than it wants to be, less than at its best it knows itself to be.¹⁴ [Emphasis added.]

Finally, Michael Lewis in *Shame: The Exposed Self* reiterates that guilt is always specific and can be tied to an event. With guilt the individual can focus on the “self’s actions and behaviors that are likely to repair the failure.” This is unlike “shame, in which the focus is on the global self.” (Lewis, 76)

To a certain extent, it matters little whether Clamence’s fall is directly related to a transgression (moral or otherwise) *since what he experiences is shame*. It is shame, and the desire to overcome it, that has over taken his life. The trio of sounds (a body striking water, a human cry for help, the mocking laughter) point to a kind of spiritual movement, a change that is occurring at the very core of Clamence’s being. Somewhere in the deep recesses of his being, the self is coming to an awareness that it is “less than it wants to be, less than at its best it knows itself to be.” (Albers, p. 13) It is here that we find the origins of Clamence’s crisis of selfhood: there is an emerging awareness that he has come up short as a human

being. As Fitch and Albers have noted, shame is an ontological condition. Clamence has experienced a violation of his “essentiality or identity as a person.” (Albers, 22) It is not so much that Clamence is free from guilt as that he has become riven with shame.

In an article entitled, “The Betrayal of the Witness: Camus' *The Fall*,” Shoshana Felman suggests that Clamence on the bridge failed as a witness, and in doing so has missed an “encounter with reality.” (Felman, 167) Felman describes the events on the bridge as something “not experienced.” (169) According to Felman, it is a failure to “know” “what is occurring outside him and in himself as well.” (167) Our reading of the novel suggests two nuanced objections to Felman’s interpretation. First, the events on the bridge, far from being “missed” or “not experienced,” continue to play themselves out as both motivation for his confessional monologue and as justification for his new *modus operandi* as judge-penitent. Clamence didn’t miss the events on the bridge, he just doesn’t know how to neutralize their significance. Second, and most significant, Felman fails to name the “reality,” the truth, that Clamence has failed to “encounter.” Instead, her analysis moves on to a critique of his status as unreliable witness to the outside world, “having failed to witness both the suicide and the other’s cry, the narrator paradoxically will turn into an obsessive witness of an outside world totally confused with his own delusions.” (Felman, 170)

Nevertheless, by framing the events on the bridge in terms of “witness,” Felman has brought us closer to a satisfactory interpretation of the events on the bridge. Clamence was not called to heroic action that night on the bridge, but he was being called to an apparently mundane activity of witness. Contrary to Felman’s assertions, the truth about Clamence is not that he was a bad, unreliable, or even, cowardly witness to the suicide, but rather that *he failed to witness at all*. Clamence failed *to care*, and in doing so he appears to have failed in his humanity. This is the unbearable truth that has begun to appear on the horizon of his consciousness. No crime has been perpetrated; strictly speaking, there is no transgression.

If there is a hole, an absence, an empty space of meaning at the heart of Clamence’s story, one which has confounded critics, it is a function of Clamence’s dual role as narrator and damaged subject. Clamence, the narrator, leads us to the bridge. Clamence, the aggrieved

subject runs from the bridge. Both movements are responses to the events on the bridge. Clamence the storyteller presents the bridge as the dramatic center of his tale, only to burden the reader with the task of plumbing its depths for its true significance. Clamence, the subject in need of healing, harmony and wholeness, flees the bridge. This flight takes the form of a monologue that shunts self-awareness in favor of self-judgment. Clamence then attempts to extricate himself from an endless cycle of self-judgment by projecting this proclivity to judge onto the world at large. René Girard is right: Camus is suggesting that judgment is not the answer. Moreover, if we consider the novel in the context of Camus' falling out with Sartre, the novel may be interpreted as an indirect criticism of the bitter climate of intellectual exchange (and judgement) that followed publication of Camus' *The Rebel*. (Onfray, 480; Fitch, 34) However, once again, such an interpretation takes us away from the dramatic center of the work.

To summarize, we have argued that the crisis of selfhood that is being played out in this novel points to a subject who is experiencing shame rather than guilt. Moreover, what is shaming Clamence can be found at the dramatic center of the novel in the series of auricular events that point to and circumscribe the meaning of his fall. But they do not name it. Or rather, Camus's narrator in his effort to flee shame obscures the true nature of the crisis: what he has learned about himself that is both more and less than guilt. But we have yet to explain the shame. What was shameful about the bridge and why did it provoke a crisis of selfhood? We will seek the answers to these questions in the third part of our study where Camus's novel will be analyzed through the prism of the spiritual paradigm.

Part III: Spiritual paradigm and its application

Sketching the contours of the spiritual paradigm

Although definitions of spirituality abound, it appeared to us that searching for a best definition or attempting to formulate an original synthesis of aphoristic statements about spirituality would not be useful. Drawing upon our training in Ignatian spirituality and our personal encounter with the literature on spirituality and selfhood, we collected a sample

of quotations that embody essential truths of the spiritual paradigm. The collection reflects insights from a variety of authors—from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to William James to Michel Foucault. The collection does not reflect a particular school of thought nor is it meant to be comprehensive. Our primary selection criterion was relevance to the problem of selfhood. From a large sample of quotations that we have collected over the years a subset of seven statements was retained. We then identified each of the quotations with a spiritual truth (verity) associated with the problem of selfhood. The process of attributing a specific meaning to the quotations was somewhat arbitrary and largely intuitive. In fact, the quotations suggested multiple meanings. Limiting interpretation to a single insight was heuristic device that enabled us to proceed more expeditiously to the deductive analysis of the novel. Our task will be to move from Clarence's secularized understanding of what has befallen him to a spiritual understanding.

Seven verities of the spiritual paradigm

- 1) Our nature – self and experience
- 2) Our orientation – self and the transcendent
- 3) Our tools – self and inner work
- 4) Our creaturehood – self and agency
- 5) Our imaginary – self and culture
- 6) Our blessedness – the self as loved (unconditionally)
- 7) Our formation – self and prayer (relatedness)

1) Our nature – self and experience

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are *spiritual beings having a human experience.*” (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. *The Phenomenon of Man*, 1955) [Emphasis added.]

2) Our orientation – self and the transcendent

“Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists *of the belief that there is an unseen order*, and that our supreme good lies in *harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.* This belief and this

adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.” (William James. *The Varieties of Human Experience*, 1911, 53) [Emphasis added.]

3) *Our tools – self and work*

“... I thought that the techniques of domination were the most important, without any exclusion of the rest. But analysing the experience of sexuality, I became more and more aware that there is in all societies, I think, in all societies whatever they are, another type of techniques, *techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves*, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on. Let’s call this kind of techniques a techniques or technology of the self.” (Michel Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” 1993, 203) [Emphasis added.]

4) *Our creaturehood – self and agency*

“It is not the self, or a self, that reaches out toward God. Rather, the self experiences a reaching-out (*iskaniem Boga* ‘a searching after God’). The self does not change (does not change itself); rather, *a change takes place in the site of the self*: ‘when and how the change took place in e ... I could not say.’” (J.M. Coetzee, “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky,” 1985, 203) [Emphasis added.]

5) *Our imaginary – self and culture*

“We seem in a terrible dilemma: we cannot talk about it [God], but if we don't, we ignore something fundamental at the heart of the work. So our powerful critical *languages go on poking at what seem to be edges*, until we decide (as in a common new historicist conversion) that the edge is the center. But like Melville's whale, the God question rises up from the displaced edge and threatens to overwhelm us.” (Dennis Taylor, “The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism,” 1996) [Emphasis added.]

6) *Our blessedness – the self as loved ‘unconditionally’*

“And so religious conversion or religious authenticity is not guaranteed by belonging to a religious community. Religious authenticity is rather the self-transcendence of unqualified loving, and that self-transcendence is possible only because one has been consciously on the receiving end of God’s unqualified love, whether one acknowledges this as coming from God or not. Religious conversion is the *twofold process of being loved unconditionally and responding to that radical gift by cooperating in the process whereby one’s own loving becomes unconditional.*” (Robert M. Doran, S.J., “What Does Bernard Lonergan Mean by ‘Conversion?’” 2011, 7) [Emphasis added.]

7) Our formation – self and prayer (relationships)

“Spiritual formation, I have come to believe, is not about steps or stages on the way to perfection. It’s about the movements *from mind to the heart through prayer in its many forms that reunite us with God, each other, and our truest selves.*” (Henri Nouwen, 2010, *Spiritual Formation*, “Introduction”) [Emphasis added.]

Application

Our nature – self and experience

Clarence is an atheist. He has no awareness of himself as a spiritual being.

Our orientation – self and the transcendent

At no point does Clarence acknowledge the existence of an unseen order and the importance of aligning oneself in harmony with this order. Although Clarence has no awareness of himself as a spiritual being, there is at least one moment in the narrative where he undertakes to articulate his sense of higher meaning and what passes, in his world, for human flourishing. He states:

Let’s pause on these heights. Now you understand what I meant when I spoke of aiming higher. I was talking, it so happens, of those supreme summits, the only

places I can really live. Yes, I have never felt comfortable except in lofty places. Even in the details of daily life, I needed to feel above. I preferred the bus to the subway, open carriages to taxis, terraces to closed-in places. (23)

He continues:

A natural balcony fifteen hundred feet above a sea still visible bathed in sunlight, on the other hand, was the place where I could breathe most freely, especially if I were alone, well above the human ants. I could readily understand why sermons, decisive preachings, and fire miracles took place on accessible heights. In my opinion no one meditated in cellars or prison cells (unless they were situated in a tower with a broad view); one just became moldy. And I could understand that man who, having entered holy orders, gave up the frock because his cell, instead of overlooking a vast landscape as he expected, looked out on a wall. (23-4)

By his own admission, Clamence is most alive when he is alone. He seeks not simply to be beyond the gaze of others, but to gaze down upon them. For Clamence, the pinnacle of existence is the “lofty” place where he is *alone* and *above*. This is the best he is able to imagine for himself.

Our tools – self and inner work

Inner work and the spiritual practices associated with it are essential to healing, wholeness, and a more spiritual way of being.

In the previous section, which dealt with transcendence, Clamence articulated his vision of the summit of existence. It is interesting to note that loftiness, the summit of existence, is related in his monologue to a commentary on prayer. If Clamence cannot imagine prayer in an enclosed space or prison cell, this may be because these places are traditionally associated with inner work. They are the places where the self turns inward in meditation and prayer. These are the places and the practices that may lead to an activity of self-emptying that, according to the spiritual paradigm, makes room for the Spirit.

Clamence associates prayer with lofty heights, but these are not the peaks of heightened consciousness from which the soul experiences the transcendent. Clamence *rises up in order to look down*, not in order to make room for something other than, or greater than, himself. He is able to endure the burden of solitude from the top, but the other solitude, the one that often accompanies times of prayer and meditation, is beyond his capacity to imagine or bear.

The only thing that passes for inner work in Clamence's monologue is the autobiographical nature of the discourse itself. It may be that Clamence's monologue enables him to gain the measure superiority he so covets. On the other hand, his autobiographical confession is largely a sham of self-reflection. He appears unable to bring to consciousness a number of fundamental truths about himself and his life: the meaning of the laughter, what has happened to him, and the nature of his response. This is a self who is inclined to ruminate but not to work or to step out of habitual patterns of thought and experience in order to move.

Our creaturehood – self and agency

The quote by the Nobel laureate, J.M. Coetzee underscores a fundamental axiom of the spiritual paradigm: we do not transform ourselves, God does. God acts first. The self is not the master of this transformation; it is the site where the Spirit transforms the self. The closest Clamence comes to acknowledging a spiritual disposition to openness and vulnerability is expressed in a mini-parable that passes, in his world, for utter folly:

I knew a pure heart who rejected distrust. He was a pacifist and libertarian and loved all humanity and the animals with an equal love. An exceptional soul, that's certain. Well, during the last wars of religion in Europe he had retired to the country. He had written on his threshold: "Wherever you come from, come in and be welcome." Who do you think answered that noble invitation? The militia, who made themselves at home and disemboweled him. (11-12)

To practice love, and the radical hospitality entailed by love, is dangerous to self-preservation. According to Clamence's world view, it is sheer folly to trust in providence. One is particularly vulnerable when acting out of love.

For Clamence the real challenge of response is epitomized in the problem of laughter. Laughter intrudes upon his consciousness. If this was a spiritual autobiography, the narrator would be experiencing a 'call'. It may be that the laughter he imagines is a veiled call to a more spiritual way of being, but Clamence experiences it as something to be dealt with and surpassed. Most of his monologue is a recounting of the strategies he has deployed, at different stages of his life, to flee or suppress the laughter.

Our imaginary – self and culture

Clamence inhabits a very dark world. One of the first comparisons he makes is between the canals of Amsterdam and the concentric circles of Dante's *Inferno*. In one telling commentary on the culture of his time, he states:

It always seemed to me that our fellow citizens had two passions: ideas and fornication. Without rhyme or reason, so to speak. Still, let us take care not to condemn them; they are not the only ones, for all Europe is in the same boat. 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. (6)

The pairing is unusual. Presumably, in Clamence's world fornication is a substitute for intimacy in human relationships. Clamence appears to be affirming that modern man lives out his existence somewhere between slavish submission to carnal desire and the daily news-fix, which passes for the exchange of ideas. These would appear to be things that are valued in our culture. However, if this is meant as a critical commentary on the state of our culture, something more would be required. Clamence would have to articulate what constitutes the obverse of these proclivities. What are the values that potentially stand in opposition to fornication and the daily newspaper fix? Could they be love, fellowship, generosity, prayer? Or the more secular values of work, discipline, personal freedom and

self-fulfillment? Clamence's musings on contemporary culture are lacking in depth and have the aura of a facile one-liner.

Our blessedness – self as loved (unconditionally)

It is important to note that Clamence's narrative is also the story of a successful man. Clamence's fall is rendered more poignant by the fact that he had risen to such heights in his previous life:

Familiar when it was appropriate, silent when necessary, capable of free and easy manner as readily as of dignity, I was always in harmony. However, my popularity was great and my successes in society innumerable. ... But just imagine, I beg you, a man at the height of his powers, in perfect health, generously gifted, skilled in bodily exercises as in those of the mind, neither rich nor poor, sleeping well and fundamentally pleased with himself without showing this otherwise than by a felicitous sociability. *You will readily see how I can speak, without modesty, of a successful life.* (27-8) [Emphasis added.]

Clamence is even prepared to see himself as blessed. But this is tempered by the admission that he does not feel that he has done anything to merit it. He states:

No, as a result of being showered with *blessings*, I felt, I hesitate to admit, marked out. Personally marked out, among all, for that long and uninterrupted success. This, after all, was a result of my modesty. I refuse to attribute that success to my own merits and could not believe that the conjunction in a single person of such different and extreme virtues was the result of chance alone. This is why in my happy life I felt somehow that that happiness was authorized *by some higher decree*. When I add that I had no religion you can see even better how extraordinary that conviction was. (29) [Emphasis added.]

Perhaps surprisingly, Clamence appears to be moving away from the discourse of a secular, self-made man.⁶ Clamence senses that he has been “showered with blessings,” “authorized by some higher decree.” However, because he “has no religion” (spirituality) there is no channel for thankfulness. On the one hand, Clamence does not live under the delusion that he was principally responsible for his happiness and success; on the other hand (he would argue) he is sufficiently clear-sighted and rational not to attribute his success and status to an invisible, providential, higher power. Since the appropriate response cannot be thankfulness, he must search elsewhere to give meaning to his ‘blessed’ experience.

It would appear that the best he can do is to admit that he feels “Personally marked out.” (29) He is not ‘chosen’ or ‘saved.’ He has been “marked out” for happiness and success. However, in the aftermath of the intrusion of laughter, he does not consider that he may have been “marked out” for laughter, i.e., *that the laughter may be providential*. It would be more fitting to say that Clamence (before the fall) is the beneficiary of good fortune. According to the spiritual paradigm, it is possible, strictly speaking, to be blessed with bad fortune. To be blessed is to know and experience God’s love. If so-called bad fortune brings us to God, that is a blessed thing.

Experiencing human, as opposed to divine, love is also problematic for Clamence. At one point he comes close to admitting a need to be loved (that is, to be loved by someone other than himself):

I still gambled a little, out of habit; but invention was lacking. I hesitate to admit it for fear of using a few more naughty words: *it seems to me that at that time I felt the need of love*. Obscene, isn’t it? In any case, I experienced a secret suffering, a sort of privation that made me emptier and allowed me, partly through obligation and partly out of curiosity, to make a few commitments. Inasmuch as I needed to love and be loved, I thought I was in love. In other words, I acted the fool. (99) [Emphasis added.]

⁶ The autobiography of Benjamin Franklin comes to mind.

In the spiritual paradigm love is a totalizing experience that touches the core of our being. God acts first. We are the recipients of her love and from this experience of gifted love, everything else flows.

Our formation – self and prayer (relatedness)

Spiritual formation refers to a shaping or molding of the self that takes place when we enter into an intimate relationship with the divine. Nouwen's quotation suggests that spirituality is fundamentally a problem of formation, that formation is rooted in prayer (in its varied forms), and that prayer ultimately "reunites" us with God, each other, and our true self. Moreover, Nouwen suggests that the direction of spiritual movement is from the mind (head) to the heart. Spiritual awareness and growth occur when the self moves from the prison of the mind to the sanctuary of the heart. And in doing so we discover our relatedness to God, each other, and our true self.

Camus' narrator exists entirely in the mind. He appears to be unaware of the intrinsic connectedness of all of creation and, as a consequence, of the numerous ways that he could have affirmed his connection to a poor soul that night on the bridge. For example, he could have acknowledged this relatedness by reporting the event to the authorities, by discussing it with a friend, or by searching the newspapers the next day. In his narrative he explicitly mentions that he did none of these things. His apparent indifference, manifest as a failure to respond in any manner, points to a profound spiritual malaise.

Clamence inhabits a world of selective connectedness. He chooses who he will be in relation with and under what conditions. Before this occurs, however, the 'other' must appear on the horizon of his consciousness. It is significant that the laughter Clamence hears several years later on the Pont des arts *intrudes* upon his consciousness. He does not call it up. But it intrudes in a peculiar way: it is associated with the earlier event, the suicide. Something new is stirring in consciousness that is beyond his control. But Clamence's existential disposition has not changed. His horizon is still narrow. Rather than responding to a potential call to greater awareness (of the other, of God, of his true self) Clamence falls back on what he knows best: moral judgementalism. Moreover, his inability to connect with another soul under the most extreme and tenuous of circumstances

produces a distorted perception of his true self. He then proceeds to deflect the shame of his failure to care away from the tainted self by projecting its fallen status upon all of humanity. The 'other' can only appear in consciousness in the context of shared guilt in a monologue that seeks to entrap *rather than to embrace* the other.

***The Fall* as transitional novel**

Three years after the publication of *The Fall* Albert Camus died tragically in an automobile accident. Two novels were published posthumously.⁷ His last fictional (non-dramatic⁸) work, *L'exile et le royaume*, was published in 1958 while he was still alive. We know from Camus' notebooks that he viewed his life work in terms of thematic "Series." (Carrol, 465). *The Fall* and the short stories contained in *Exile and the Kingdom* were part of the third thematic grouping, "Judgment and Exile." This was to be followed by a series entitled "Love" that would include, *The First Man* (incomplete), an essay entitled "The Myth of Nemesis," and "Don Faust" (never started). The final series would be called, "Creation Corrected" or "The System." (Camus 2008, 158)

At least one critic has suggested that the final story in *Exile and Judgment*, "The Growing Stone," involves a protagonist who is moving towards love. In this story a French engineer named d'Arrast has been commissioned to build a seawall in a remote Brazilian village. There he encounters a sailor who recounts the miraculous tale of his survival of a shipwreck. In thanksgiving for his salvation, which he attributes to Jesus, the sailor commits himself to carrying a 50 kilo stone in a religious procession. When he falters under the weight of the stone, d'Arrast relieves him of his burden. However, on the way to the church he changes his route, and directs himself to the man's hut where he drops the stone in the middle of the floor. The sailor, far from being disappointed, invites d'Arrast to sit and join them. Stourzh describes the lessons of the tale thus, "A nobleman comes to the rescue of an humble, faltering fellow-being, and thereby rescues himself. The second chance having been grasped, there also dawns another kind of redemption from which Clamence

⁷ *La Mort heureuse* (written 1936–38, published posthumously in 1971); *Le premier homme* (incomplete, published posthumously in 1995).

⁸ Three plays were published in 1958 : *Caligula*, *Le Malentendu*, *L'État de siège*, and *Les Justes*.

had been barred. D'Arrast, in contrast to Clamence, is capable, perhaps again capable, of love." (Stourzh, p. 55)

In "Camus: Journals of the Plague Years," Thomas Merton stresses Clamence's failure to love, "Clamence is perhaps a kind of 'saint without God.' He is activated not by life-giving grace but by the self-scrutiny of an ironic and hatefully lucid mind that is incapable of love." (Merton, 229) Merton continues, "The only possible relationship with another is the relationship of subject to object, of judge to penitent—proving to the other that all have sinned and all are in despair, that all must condemn." (230) Merton, perceptively concludes that *The Fall*, "represented a dead end beyond which there was no further progress possible in Camus' artistic development. He had to take another course." (230) With reference to Camus' *Notebooks*, Merton argues that the Camus was planning to go back to the "earlier praise of life that filled his first two books ..." (Ibid.)

In an essay on Camus' *The Plague* Merton reiterates this insight, "Finally, however, Camus was planning to deal with what most attracted him: a "certain kind of love"—a fuller development of those life affirming themes which we find in some of his early essays and also in the conversations between Rieux and Tarrou in *The Plague*." (186)

Conclusion

In "The Degrees of Self-Transcendence" Bernard Lonergan uses the term "drifters" to describe individuals who have not achieved a modicum of consciousness:

For drifters have not yet found themselves. They have not yet found their own deed and so a will of their own, and so they are content to choose what everyone else is choosing. They have not yet developed minds of their own, and so they are content to think and say what everyone else is saying and thinking. And everyone else, it happens, can be doing and choosing and thinking and saying what others are doing and choosing and thinking and saying. (Lonergan, 597)

Clamence is not a drifter. His is a singular consciousness shaped by a heightened awareness that something is wrong at the very core of his being.

Pieter De Jong has noted that Clamence after the fall is someone that one can talk to about spiritual things.

It is very hard to talk with people like Clamence before he “fell.” The lack of awareness of the gap in life makes it almost impossible even to raise the question of gospel. Jesus had the hardest time with the Pharisees. He came for those who are in need of the physician, and Clamence after the fall knows something is wrong. He is more like the publican with whom Jesus could talk. (De Jong, 256)

However, this is not to suggest that Clamence is on the “doorstep of Christianity.” (Ibid.) Rather, De Jong suggests, Camus’ purpose may have been “to show how relatively successful Clamence is in escaping the gnawing pains of the sickness unto death.” (Ibid.)

It is important to emphasize that Camus does not portray Clamence as not a spiritual searcher. Clamence does not search out the laughter. It intrudes upon his consciousness. He resists the laughter with all the tools at his disposal, most notably his compulsion to feel superior. In effect, he meets the change that has occurred in his life by marshaling the very modus operandi of social, moral and professional superiority that created the conditions for the intrusion of laughter in the first place. *The only thing that has changed is the heightened, conscious application of the logic of superiority to the new condition of his life: the old way of being applied to the new condition of life.* In this respect, Camus has portrayed a secular everyman who through a tremendous effort of will partially succeeds in escaping the shame associated with his failure to ‘to be’ in the world in manner commensurate with his humanity.

No doubt *The Fall* represents an extreme portrait of what it means for a self ‘to be’ in the world without experiencing love. Our deductive analysis allowed us to pinpoint the numerous ways that Clamence’s response to the laughter departed from the verities of the spiritual paradigm. Clamence does not believe in God. He is not aware of his nature as a spiritual being. He is not disposed to prayer or any kind of inner work. He does not know how to quiet his soul. He derives little comfort from secular culture, which he views as superficial and judgmental. Under the prism of the spiritual paradigm we were able to see that Clamence has not so much fallen into unwarranted self-abasement, extreme

consciousness, or traditional Christian guilt, as he has missed a call to spiritual transformation.

Is there a place from which a fully secularized individual such as Clamence may begin his or her spiritual journey? Is there a place for movement and hope? We believe that Camus' novel suggests at least two areas where the divided self may begin such a journey.

As the monologue comes to a close, Clamence reveals that he has known all along what is at stake: the call to "change lives." He states:

To be sure, my solution is not the ideal. But when you don't like your own life, when you know that you must change lives, you don't have any choice, do you? What can one do to become another. Impossible. One would have to cease being anyone, forget oneself for someone else, at least once. But how? Don't bear down too hard on me. (144-5)

In spiritual terms Clamence is articulating the problem of *self-emptying*. This is where he stumbles. This is where the path toward spiritual movement becomes impossible. He is unable to imagine how he could change without ceasing to be "anyone." But what if the one he is meant to be is already there, and Clamence (alone on the summit) is simply the illusion of a troubled consciousness. What if he is not being called to nothingness, but to authenticity and love? What if Clamence's crisis of selfhood is inextricably linked to the call he receives on the bridge?

At the dramatic center of the novel we find Clamence's failure to respond in any manner to the suicide on the bridge. The events on the bridge are key to interpreting the novel because they enable us to see that Clamence is not being called to religion—a belief system. If a leap of faith is required, it is not in the direction of a totalizing system of thought, the transcendent, or metaphysical concepts such as God and ultimate reality. If as Merton has suggested, Camus was beginning to explore the existential possibilities of "a certain kind of love," then Clamence on the bridge is being called to simple compassion and care. He is being called 'to be' in relation to the other.

If we accept the proposition that Clamence has missed a call, failed in his response, what can the application of the spiritual paradigm tell us about “wrong turnings and right turnings, achieved insights, persistent blindness” (see ‘Introduction’ above) in this instance? Where is the persistent blindness? Clamence is probably much too hard on himself. He is so programmed to respond through an effort of the mind that he never truly grasps in his *heart* (Nouwen, p. xvi) what has occurred on the bridge. *It is so much more and so much less than anything he is capable of imagining.* He believes himself to be guilty of inaction on the bridge. But this is not the source of his shame. He is not so much a coward as he is a soul profoundly disconnected from life and love. The laughter he hears may be understood as a call to simply enlarge his sphere of caring to one individual on a bridge, or to the next individual he encounters who may be in need. If he were simply to connect to that anonymous individual (or the next one), it is possible that the slow process of transformation would begin. This would appear to be the lesson of Camus’ next published work, “The Growing Stone.”

Finally, the novel raises the question, how is one called? And how do we respond when we are called? It would be a travesty of the spiritual paradigm to suggest that one is only called in moments of awe and wonder. The experience of joy can be a tremendous comfort to the spiritual searcher. But we can also experience a call to spiritual transformation in those moments and events that startle and unsettle us—moments of crisis that challenge the very the core of our identity and our being.

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