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# THE INTERLOCUTOR IN *LA CHUTE*: A KEY TO ITS MEANING

By H. ALLEN WHARTENBY

"LES TYRANS savent qu'il y a dans l'œuvre d'art une force d'émancipation qui n'est mystérieuse que pour ceux qui n'en ont pas le culte. Chaque grande œuvre rend plus admirable et plus riche la face humaine."<sup>1</sup> In spite of this and similar statements by Camus, critics invoke Clamence to assert the impossibility of escaping from what is seen as the dilemma of modern man; and most readings are either pessimistic or ambiguous. Wayne Booth sees Clamence as an extreme to which "an author can carry the effort to implicate the reader by trying to confuse him." "It is precisely because there is no author in sight that Clamence can trick both his auditor and reader into undergoing the same spiritual collapse that he has himself experienced," Booth continues, "and Clamence's failure becomes our general failure to meet moral responsibility."<sup>2</sup> Encouraged by the epigraph to the English translation of *La Chute*, Roger Quilliot feels that Clamence is symbolic of modern man, but that Camus must be ridiculing him. Admitting that the reader is left in uncertainty, Quilliot states that Clamence is Everyman, but "insaisissable et masqué"; and, curiously, the work takes on a meaning which is "largement humaine."<sup>3</sup> Sanford Ames reads the *récit* as, in part, an answer to the Sartrean camp, in which Clamence acts out "a temptation of the liberal non-Marxist thinker, faced with a crisis of confidence, doubting a traditional code which assumed the goodness of man and taking refuge in sterile self-examination and sharing of guilt."<sup>4</sup> Representing a self-appointed judge playing on a feeling of universal guilt, Clamence and what he stands for must be rejected if we are to be consistent with Camus's basic attitudes; and still another approach to *La Chute* seems necessary. As Camus said, referring to *L'Homme révolté*, "Je ne crois pas, en ce qui me concerne, aux livres isolés."<sup>5</sup>

A more satisfying interpretation results from the dramatic reading in which the interlocutor's reactions to the *comédien* may illuminate the author's intention. Camus pointed out in answering a question on techniques used in *La Chute* that he intentionally chose "une technique de théâtre (le monologue dramatique et le dialogue implicite) pour décrire un comédien tragique."<sup>6</sup> By reading the *récit* with one ear cocked for the interlocutor's responses, Camus's reader may be able to disentangle the three personalities Cla-

mence would apparently like to treat as one—himself, his listener, and the reader. In this way *La Chute* is changed in form from an intriguing character study or moral exploration thinly disguised by Clamence's confession into a drama of ideas. The reader becomes an interested and detached observer at a skid-row bar and elsewhere in Amsterdam as he listens to a series of conversations, even though he cannot quite hear the words of the second person.<sup>7</sup>

In many cases the interlocutor's unheard responses are not difficult to infer. The easiest to isolate are those signaled by Clamence's "Com-

<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *Essais* (Paris: Pléiade, 1965), p. 1094. Quilliot fails to mention that Camus's Upsala speech is merely a shortened and polished repetition of one he read before the Associazione Culturale Italiana at the beginning of the 1954 season. Published in their review, *Quaderni Aci*, it was reprinted by Germaine Brée in her *Albert Camus: De L'Envers et l'endroit à L'Exile et le royaume* (New York: Dell Laurel Library, 1963). Except for a new first paragraph, the changes consist in omissions, revisions within paragraphs, and minor variants.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), p. 294. As an Aristotelian, Booth grounds his quarrel with modern fiction on his belief that the reader will identify himself with flawed characters who are presented without authorial control (see also p. 283 or p. 391); and he implies that Clamence is representative of unreliable narrators in literature from Gide to the present.

<sup>3</sup> "Présentation" to *La Chute*, in *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles* (Paris: Pléiade, 1962), p. 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Sanford Ames, "La Chute: From Summitry to Speleology," *FR*, xxxix (Feb. 1966), 560.

<sup>5</sup> *Essais*, p. 743.

<sup>6</sup> Reprinted in *Essais*, p. 1927. The technique is, of course, by no means new in poetry or prose. See, e.g., Roger Martin du Gard's passage: "Le Docteur.—'La langue . . . Bon . . . As-tu bien dormi, cette semaine? Pas trop? Tu t'agites toujours dans ton lit? Tu te réveilles parce que tu as trop chaud? Ah. . . ?'" (*Jean Barois*, Paris: Gallimard, 1960, p. 18). For Camus's comments on the novel, see *Essais*, pp. 1140–41. See also Quilliot's "Présentation" to *La Chute*, p. 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Carina Gadourek's analysis of the interlocutor's reactions seems unsatisfactory because, as she reads *La Chute*, she feels that the interlocutor falls under Clamence's spell to the point of according to the judge-penitent an unqualified triumph: "Vaincu, celui-ci [l'Autre] commence ses aveux" (*Les Innocents et les coupables*, The Hague: Mouton, 1963, p. 189). Germaine Brée, too, noted the possibility of a dialogue. Mentioning the work's "devastating humor," she added: "A dramatic monologue, obviously, is not the same thing as a personal confession. . . . [Unlike] Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* no 'philosopher,' unless it be the reader himself, is there to maintain the dialogue." Introduction to *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 9. I should like to acknowledge here Miss Brée's helpful suggestions for organizing this article.

ment?" followed by a repetition as a question of what the interlocutor said. Similarly, Clamence often precedes a repetition of the response by a rejection, "mais non," "allons donc," or by an approval, "mais oui." More difficult to demonstrate are apparent responses which Clamence merely repeats without prefacing them. In some cases, where statements do not follow each other logically, it seems advisable to supply what could plausibly be the interlocutor's speeches. In one extremely difficult passage, for example, Clamence may well have provoked the interlocutor to reply by the tenor of his remarks as he comments that he loves life and that he bends to circumstances because he loves himself more than principles. The suggested conversation would proceed as follows:

—Tenez, après tout ce que je vous ai raconté, que croyez-vous qu'il me soit venu?

—Le dégoût de vous-même?

—Le dégoût de moi-même? Allons donc, c'était des autres que j'étais dégoûté.

—Comment cela! Après avoir révélé vos faiblesses, votre vanité et vos défaillances, vous pouvez dire cela?

—Certes, je connaissais mes défaillances et je les regrettais. Je continuais pourtant de les oublier, avec une obstination assez méritoire. Le procès des autres, au contraire, se faisait sans trêve dans mon cœur.

—Pouvez-vous juger les autres quand vous n'êtes pas meilleur vous-même?

—Certainement, cela vous choque? Vous pensez peut-être que ce n'est pas logique? Mais la question n'est pas de rester logique. La question est de glisser au travers et surtout, oh! oui, surtout, la question est d'éviter le jugement. Je ne dis pas d'éviter le châtime-ment. Car le châtime-ment sans jugement est supportable. Il a un nom d'ailleurs qui garantit notre innocence: le malheur.

—Vous dites que le châtime-ment sans jugement garantit notre innocence? Mais, vous avez dit aussi qu'il s'agit de juger continuellement.

—Non, il s'agit au contraire de couper au jugement, d'éviter d'être toujours jugé, sans que jamais la sentence soit prononcée.<sup>8</sup>

Apparently convinced that intelligent discourse is impossible, the interlocutor falls silent. Although this is subjective supposition and an individual opinion of the development, only a reading of this nature can provide logical continuity.

In view of frequent and obvious evidence of dialogue, especially in the first section, it is surprising that debate on the substance and importance of the interlocutor's reaction has not started sooner. On the first two pages of *La Chute*, the interlocutor speaks at least five times,

but the exchanges are polite and unrevealing. Clamence opens the *récit* with a question which is surely answered, for otherwise the judge-penitent could not have known that the man who has just entered wants gin: "A moins que vous ne m'autorisiez à plaider votre cause, il ne devinera pas que vous désirez du genièvre." Although the interlocutor could give his authorization by sign, it is unlikely that, in such a situation, he would not add a word of thanks; and Clamence apparently communicated with the bartender: "Voilà, j'ose espérer qu'il m'a compris." At the end of the first paragraph, the interlocutor invites him to sit down: "Je vous remercie et j'accepterais si j'étais sûr de ne pas jouer les fâcheux." Once more a polite protest elicits Clamence's response: "Vous êtes trop bon. J'installerai donc mon verre auprès du vôtre." Clamence's next statement undoubtedly reflects the interlocutor's comment, which is repeated: "Vous avez raison, son mutisme est assourdissant." Similarly, deeper in the paragraph, Clamence reflects the interlocutor's question about the relationship of the bartender to the foreigners who drink at the *Mexico-City*: "Mais non, celui-ci ne sent pas son exil."

Clamence's first request for personal information is followed immediately by a neutral question: "Ferez-vous un long séjour à Amsterdam? Belle ville, n'est-ce pas? Fascinante? Voilà un adjectif que je n'ai pas entendu depuis longtemps" (p. 10). Social conventions being what they are, it is unlikely that the interlocutor did not answer the first question and, incidentally, provide Clamence with the information that he had four more days in which to try to cast his spell. The second question is clearly answered. After the first discreet probe, Clamence shifts to a topic more in keeping with the surroundings. He states that man suffers from "deux fureurs: les idées et la fornication." Characteristically, he repeats for emphasis: "Une phrase leur suffira pour l'homme moderne: il forniquait et lisait des journaux" (p. 11). To a careful reader, and possibly to the interlocutor, ideas and reading newspapers are rarely synonymous, even when relating to the kind of literary battles fought over *L'Homme révolté*. Whether Clamence is alluding to journalistic aspects of Sartrean thought, or to Camus's part in the quarrel, or to neither, he maintains the interlocutor's interest: "Les Hollandais, oh non, ils sont beaucoup moins mo-

<sup>8</sup> *La Chute* (Paris, 1956), p. 90. Subsequent references are to this edition.

dernes! Ils ont le temps, regardez-les. Que font-ils? Eh bien, ces messieurs-ci vivent du travail de ces dames-là" (p. 11). By asking if the Dutch are included in Clamence's definition and by asking what they are doing in the bar, the interlocutor may be anticipating his question at the end of the section about the women behind windows.

Possibly encouraged by the implications of the interlocutor's question, Clamence attempts to discredit some of the stabilizing factors of modern life, and then he probes more deeply into the identity of his drinking companion: "Vous êtes sans doute dans les affaires? A peu près? Excellante réponse!" (p. 13). Several more leading questions are asked: "Possédez-vous des richesses? Quelques-unes? Bon. Les avez-vous partagées avec les pauvres? Non. Vous êtes donc ce que j'appelle un saducéen" (p. 14). After admitting that he was not poor, the interlocutor probably did not answer the next question, as is suggested by the absence of a question mark after "Non," but apparently asked one instead.<sup>9</sup> Clamence then seems to be launching into a long monologue when the interlocutor must be interrupting: "Allons, ne cherchez plus. . . je vous l'ai déjà dit. . . Oui, j'ai été riche, non je n'ai rien partagé avec les autres. Qu'est-ce que cela prouve? Que j'étais aussi un saducéen. . ." (p. 15). And Clamence abruptly changes the subject. With this, the interlocutor rises to leave, asks for directions, and permits the judge-penitent to accompany him. On approaching the bridge, Clamence states that they are in a Dantesque hell: "Ici, nous sommes dans le dernier cercle. Le cercle des . . . Ah! Vous savez cela?" (p. 20). The interlocutor clearly speaks out and states that he knows the circle of those who have betrayed.

It should be clear that the interlocutor does exist as an individual to whose comments Clamence reacts and whose questions Clamence answers. Moreover, the reader is quickly able to form a rough portrait of a relatively successful professional man in his forties who knows at least Dante's *Inferno*, the Bible, and who winces at the pompous use of the imperfect subjunctive. This man with soft hands, though, seems out of place in that part of Amsterdam. The fogs and concentric circles of the city are effective Dantesque symbols; and a tourist abroad, common enough literally, may suggest a modern Dante guided through the first part of his journey. A significant, literal reason for the interlocutor's presence in the *Mexico-City*, a part of Clamence's hell, may be seen in his final question, reflected by Clamence: "Bonne nuit! Comment? Ces

dames, derrière ces vitrines?" (p. 21). In a description whose parody of Baudelairean imagery is effectively ironic, Clamence responds by encouraging further exploration. This enthusiastic exhortation may well be Clamence's joyous reaction to an individual whom he believes driven to that neighborhood and to an act of Sartrian *mauvaise foi* by such tormenting problems as could weaken his defenses against the judge-penitent's message. As Clamence points out toward the conclusion, he is looking for the "bourgeois qui s'égare" (p. 160). The man who goes astray, who wanders to the waterfront and red-light districts, is welcomed by Clamence as a person wrenched from a comfortable routine by the same factors that drove the ex-lawyer from Paris. Since Clamence's attack requires identification of interlocutor and speaker, the ideal "client" would be someone hoping to escape from the kind of haunting laughter that followed Clamence and from the causes that produced it.

In the first section, then, Clamence has made contact with a "client" who is attracted by the judge-penitent's volubility and who wants to know more about the strange "profession." The second section opens with a response to the interlocutor's apparent question: "Qu'est-ce qu'un judge-pénitent? Ah! je vous ai intrigué avec cette histoire?" (p. 23). Because he cannot know that Clamence must postpone a revelation of his technique until he is ready to spring the trap, the interlocutor is obliged to continue asking questions which are turned aside. Such questions also serve to indicate that the interlocutor's interest is sufficiently aroused for the judge-penitent to begin his "work" in earnest. Beginning with his *vie édénique*, Clamence alternately teases his listener with hints designed to augment his curiosity and subjects him to a fuller view of mankind as seen by the judge-penitent. Moments after Clamence mentioned the fateful evening which marked the end of his "inauthentic" life (p. 37), the interlocutor asks for more details about it: "Comment? Quel soir? J'y viendrai, soyez patient avec moi" (p. 39). Making an easy transition back to his subject of friendship, Clamence continues his appeal. The interlocutor listens patiently while Clamence expresses his attitudes toward the death of others before interrupting again: "Comment? j'y viens, ne craignez rien, j'y suis encore, du reste" (p. 44). Although he does not repeat the question, Clamence im-

<sup>9</sup> A further complication is caused by an apparent omission in the *Pléiade* text (p. 1478).

plies by his answer that the interlocutor is asking once more for a clear statement of the nature of the judge-penitent's activities. The ensuing description of the laugh which pursued the "generous lawyer" may be seen as an answer to the question, and it is indeed an important element in the presentation. For the interlocutor, however, because he had no reason to believe otherwise, this must have been the experience related to a bridge which caused Clamence's downfall; and he is properly disappointed. Instead of being interested in Clamence's statement that his image in the mirror seemed double, the interlocutor shows his impatience by a question which takes Clamence unawares: "Comment? Pardonnez-moi, je pensais à autre chose. Je vous reverrai demain, sans doute. Demain, oui, c'est cela. Non, non, je ne puis rester" (p. 48). The interlocutor's first question evidently urged Clamence to clarify the meaning of that experience, while the second may be interpreted as a request for him to stay long enough to give the desired information. However that may be, they separate; and the interlocutor is obliged to return the following evening to satisfy his curiosity.

The third section opens with Clamence's acknowledging his listener's questions with gratitude for his curiosity; but the tempo slows perceptibly as he begins to discuss the laugh. Clamence attributes his difficulty in getting started to his being in poor form; but no sooner does he make the transition to his own topics than his old style returns. As he develops the important section on slavery, concluding with a Sartrean kind of hell where one is classified once and for all, Clamence cleverly attempts to prevent his own classification by pleading insincerity. It is not without significance that Clamence asks the interlocutor for his *enseigne* and is greeted by silence (p. 57). The interlocutor still seems to be retaining a lucid mind despite Clamence's subtle and persuasive tactics. As Mme Gadourek justly pointed out: "Puisque Clamence s'est déclaré avocat et comédien, l'Autre est libre de se moquer de ses histoires."<sup>10</sup> The attitude of "L'Autre" is therefore of primary importance. If the interlocutor is intimidated into confessing his unworthiness, Clamence has realized his objective; if he outwits him by avoiding the trap, "l'Autre" retains Clamence in his own private hell. The conflict of personalities is well on its way, and it would seem that the stakes are high.

After recounting the episode of the motorbike, Clamence returns to his successful amatory episodes and comments that charm is "une manière

de s'entendre répondre oui sans avoir posé aucune question claire. Ainsi de moi à l'époque." The interlocutor's reaction is what a normal reader's would probably be—not agreement but surprise: "Cela vous surprend? Allons, ne le niez pas!" Clamence, however, interprets the apparent reaction as a comment on what he must assume to be a change in physical appearance: "Avec la tête qui m'est venue, c'est bien naturel" (p. 67). Undaunted, he continues by recounting a series of affairs and by an elaboration of his technique that would be disagreeable to an average listener under normal circumstances. As when he asked for the interlocutor's *enseigne*, Clamence again attempts to intimidate his companion: "Songez pourtant à votre vie, mon cher compatriote! Creusez votre mémoire, peut-être y trouverez-vous quelque histoire semblable que vous me conterez plus tard" (p. 76). But here Clamence is on firmer psychological ground, and he seems to sense it. Changing his approach by cleverly modulating his arrogant tone, he proceeds with more lucid self-criticism from narrative to analysis. The method works, and the listener is temporarily trapped. Clamence does seem to find a sympathetic reaction from the man who apparently took the "voyage à peu de frais" the first evening. In his analysis of his own attitudes toward love and sex, Clamence states that there was no affection in his relations with women, and when affection existed on their part, it quickly became a weight (p. 78). Only by using others for his gratification could he be happy; and he concludes in Sartrean style: "En somme, pour que je vive heureux, il fallait que les êtres que j'étais ne vécussent point" (p. 80). Possibly affected by the lateness of the hour and probably by a few drinks of gin, far too powerful an ally for Clamence to neglect, the interlocutor reacts "properly" to this element in the judge-penitent's presentation. Clamence adds that he felt a resulting "sentiment curieux": "Ne serait-ce pas la honte? La honte, dites-moi, mon cher compatriote, ne brûle-t-elle pas un peu?" The interlocutor's answer is clearly reflected: "Oui? Alors il s'agit peut-être d'elle, ou d'un de ces sentiments ridicules qui concernent l'honneur" (p. 80). No sooner does Clamence feel that he has his listener under his control than he begins to absolve him. And with the victory in that battle, he moves forward immediately into a statement of his failure to act when the girl presumably jumped from the bridge. If he can elicit an equally favor-

<sup>10</sup> *Les Innocents et les coupables*, p. 180.

able response, which would indicate that the interlocutor too is guilty of a failure to meet responsibilities, Clamence can look forward to winning the campaign as well. It is significant that the interlocutor manifests interest by initiating the request for another meeting. Clamence has gained the advantage as the interlocutor presses him for more details: "Quoi? Cette femme? Ah, je ne sais pas, vraiment, je ne sais pas" (p. 83).

At the beginning of the fourth section, however, Clamence's rhetoric falls on the ears of a man who has apparently recovered from the previous evening. Clamence begins by trying another version of his trick designed to give the impression of creating a closer intellectual relationship between himself and his listener. Just as he had isolated them together above the "animals" at the *Mexico-City*, so by isolating them on an island and by interpreting the landscape as "le néant sensible aux yeux," he feels that he can intensify the spirit of kinship: "Vous et moi, seulement, devant la planète enfin déserte!" The listener's apparent statement echoes as what must be a disquieting question for Clamence: "Le ciel vit?" (p. 86). Here indeed is an ambiguous statement, which Clamence turns to his own uses by suggesting that his interlocutor was alluding to the doves circling above. The obvious symbolism of the circling doves, wanting to descend, but unable to find a "head" on which to light, presents a development which the interlocutor probably did not like: "Vous ne comprenez pas ce que je veux dire?" (p. 87). Since the effectiveness of Clamence's strategy depends on stressing similarities and on ignoring differences in outlook, he conceals his probable disappointment by professing fatigue and absentmindedness while shifting to the more promising topic of friendship.

In a passage that seems designed to intimidate a person whose defenses are weakening, Clamence states: "Le plus souvent, au contraire, nous nous confessons à ceux qui nous ressemblent et qui partagent nos faiblesses" (pp. 97-98). After generalizing that we want neither to correct nor to improve ourselves, that we have strength enough neither for good nor for evil, Clamence asks a revealing question: "Connaissez-vous Dante? Vraiment? Diable" (p. 98). The implications of his having forgotten the interlocutor's earlier answer as well as his own contradiction suggest that he pays no real attention to his listener, having already classified him. Clamence's next question probably reflects the inter-

locutor's ambiguous exhortation: "De la patience?" We can infer only that the interlocutor is urging him to be patient with the intention of suggesting a possible future change—to use Dante's terminology, that he may rise eventually to Purgatory.<sup>11</sup> After Clamence makes a verbal transition away from the interlocutor's remark, he explains his problem of proving to the world that he was not "simple." The reaction is reflected in Clamence's admonition: "Ne souriez pas" (p. 99). If the smile were sympathetic, Clamence would not object; therefore we must assume the contrary.

The interlocutor's next indication that he is not reacting "properly" is perhaps the factor that causes a temporary intermission in the discussion. After describing the effect on himself of a major factor in his fall, the realization of the personal reality of death (p. 104), Clamence relates the efforts he made to destroy the earlier image he had created of himself. Perhaps irritated, perhaps uncomfortable, the interlocutor must have shown a change of expression or indicated in some way an unfavorable reaction. Like the apprentice lawyers, he must have shown a "gêne un peu réticente" (p. 111). It is indeed significant that Clamence asks his interlocutor if he is willing to hear him out: "Voulez-vous que nous nous taisions pour savourer cette heure assez sinistre? Non, je vous intéresse? Vous êtes bien honnête" (p. 112). Whether the interlocutor is sincere or not in his expression of interest, it should be clear that Clamence is not making the kind of impression he made the previous evening.

On the trip back from the island, the interlocutor apparently breaks an appreciable silence with a question or comment to which Clamence's first sentence is a reply: "Vous vous trompez, cher, le bateau file à bonne allure" (p. 113). During the conversation on the first three pages the interlocutor speaks at least five times as Clamence attempts to win back his interest and sympathy. After that brief exchange the interlocutor listens quietly while Clamence elaborates again his belief that love does not exist and describes his months of debauchery. For Clamence this leads into a consideration of religion and its failure to establish some sort of innocence for all. At the end of this development Clamence implies a

<sup>11</sup> Theologically oriented critics who have confused Clamence with Camus may have a rewarding study in the probability of Clamence's future conversion, despite the indication that the direction of the journey up to Limbo is the opposite from Dante's.

causal sequence in three confusing sentences. There is, he states, frequent verbal expression of pity, although no one shows pity toward another because no one is acquitted. Without specifying the accusation, he concludes that therefore all are guilty, innocence is dead, and judges swarm. Possibly challenged by the interlocutor is the following statement that judges of all races, Christian as well as "ceux de l'Antéchrist," are the same and reconciled in "le malconfort" (p. 134). Indeed, Clamence seems to confess almost gaily that his reasoning illustrates general madness, just as Descartes's former residence now houses the insane; and he adds: "Vous avez pu vous apercevoir que je n'épargne rien et, de votre côté, je sais que vous n'en pensez pas moins. Dès lors, puisque nous sommes tous juges, nous sommes tous coupables les uns devant les autres, tous chrétiens à notre vilaine manière, un à un crucifiés, et toujours sans savoir. Nous le serions du moins, si moi, Clamence, je n'avais trouvé l'issue, la seule solution, la vérité enfin . . ." (p. 135).<sup>12</sup> If this is not contradictory nonsense, it is at least a statement which provokes an interruption and apparently a longer comment than the interlocutor has made before: "Non, je m'arrête, cher ami, ne craignez rien!" Why the "Non"? Has the interlocutor merely expressed impatience ("je m'arrête"), or has he questioned Clamence's sanity ("ne craignez rien!")? Nevertheless, Clamence continues with a transition into a statement which the interlocutor apparently finds equally objectionable. After asserting that false prophets are springing up everywhere, Clamence concludes: "Heureusement je suis arrivé, moi! Je suis la fin et le commencement, j'annonce la loi. Bref, je suis juge-pénitent" (p. 136).<sup>13</sup> The interlocutor's ostensibly abrupt and probably strong objection is reflected in Clamence's weary reply: "Oui, oui, je vous dirai demain en quoi consiste ce beau métier." One can easily imagine an auditor who would react to such a statement, but the request for further clarification of the "profession" is indeed perplexing.

The last day's conversation opens with a section in which Clamence justifies to himself and thereby underscores again the liberties he takes with truth. He continues with his pontifical adventures and reveals the location of the stolen painting. For more than twenty pages the interlocutor appears for only minor and encouraging intrusions, while Clamence completes his exposition.<sup>14</sup> Now, paradoxically, the interlocutor passes judgment. Clamence admits that he fabri-

cates "un portrait qui est celui de tous et de personne" (p. 161), and that he tries to intimidate or persuade his listener to believe that the portrait is a mirror. He repeats for emphasis, but with a striking change in style: "Couvert de cendres, m'arrachant lentement les cheveux, le visage labouré par les ongles, mais le regard perçant, je me tiens devant l'humanité entière, récapitulant mes hontes, sans perdre de vue l'effet que je produis, et disant: 'j'étais le dernier des derniers.' Alors, insensiblement, je passe, dans mon discours, du 'je' au 'nous'" (p. 162). Unlike Clamence's style, the first sentence sounds more like a wretched parody of Rousseau; and when Clamence states that he shifts from "I" to "we," the reader should be mildly surprised that the interlocutor does not intrude immediately. This, however, is the *dénouement*, and Camus has worked out the effects meticulously. If the interlocutor (and reader) can be persuaded to accept the degrading portrait as a mirror, Clamence achieves his purpose and can reassert his superiority by listening to that confession: "Essayez. J'écouterai soyez-en sûr, votre propre confession, avec un grand sentiment de fraternité" (pp. 162-163). He now discovers how unsuccessful he has been: "Ne riez pas! Oui, vous êtes un client difficile, je l'ai vu du premier coup." Here the laugh cannot be the uncertain, self-conscious prelude to a confession, for Clamence admits that his "client" has proved to be "difficile." The interlocutor is reacting in a healthy, intelligent way—he does not attempt to reason with the judge—

<sup>12</sup> The problems in the passage are numerous. By the turn of the phrase in the first sentence, Clamence seems to be asserting that the interlocutor spares nothing either, despite indications to the contrary. In the second sentence the apparently false premise, "nous sommes tous juges," leads to the logically invalid and false conclusion that we are all guilty. This would seem to have little to do with our all being "christs" crucified "sans savoir." And *what* we do not know is left to the reader to supply. Moreover, there is a contradiction with other passages: "Quand nous serons tous coupables, ce sera la démocratie" (p. 157).

<sup>13</sup> In view of the interlocutor's implicit statement that he is leaving the next day, it would be tempting to consider, if impossible to demonstrate, that Clamence had been right in his first impression and that the interlocutor was driven to the *Mexico-City* by problems of the kind that had wrenched Clamence's life awry; but that a few hours with Clamence cured him. This interpretation would give added ironic significance to Clamence's statement that he was the end of the interlocutor's old attitudes, the beginning of the new, and that he revealed a new law under which the interlocutor could live in relative peace with himself.

<sup>14</sup> At one point, however, as Clamence describes his preaching to his "flock" the virtues of servitude, an unsympathetic comment may have elicited the reply: "Mais je ne suis pas fou" (p. 158).

penitent; he refuses to open a discussion or suggest alternatives. He laughs, and laughs loudly. With that laugh Clamence's whole edifice collapses about him. If, as I believe, Camus offers us the interlocutor as a representative reader, we must infer that Clamence has told and is to repeat his story endlessly, only to be greeted with ridicule.<sup>15</sup> Such an interpretation would create for Clamence a new circle in a very Dantesque hell where he is condemned to a repetitious, ignoble activity, from which hope is completely withheld.

Still struggling against defeat, Clamence insists that he has made a strong impression on his interlocutor and pleads with him to return. Although he affirms vigorously that he has discovered a satisfying way of life, Clamence belies his words and reveals psychological disorder by frantic assertions. He will begin his confession again, he states, immediately: "Quelle ivresse de se sentir Dieu le père. . . je lis la tristesse de la condition commune. . . Et moi, je plains sans absoudre, je comprends sans pardonner et surtout, ah, je sens enfin que l'on m'adore!" (p. 165). Clamence's alternating expressions of frenetic exaltation and frenzied despair give the overall impression of a series of contradictions which suggest a condition bordering on insanity. His disappointment and frustration are readily apparent as he registers what must be just another humiliating failure.

It is tempting to consider the interlocutor's verbal intervention as a helpful suggestion when Clamence states: "Mais quand on n'aime pas sa vie, quand on sait qu'il faut en changer, on n'a pas le choix, n'est-ce pas? Que faire pour être un autre? Impossible. Il faudrait n'être plus personne, s'oublier pour quelqu'un, une fois, au moins" (p. 167). His advice to Clamence, possibly to become something else, as indicated stylistically by a question reflecting an answer to "n'est-ce pas?" and followed by Clamence's "Impossible," is rejected because Clamence could never forget himself for another. Be that as it may, Clamence's "Mais comment? Ne m'accablez pas trop," indicates that the interlocutor may be taking his revenge by heaping abuse upon him. It seems apparent that the person who has just laughed Clamence's "system" into its deserved place now berates the individual who has attempted to entangle him in a malicious trap.

Clamence is now virtually crushed. While looking out the window and echoing an earlier passage by comparing the falling snow to descending doves (p. 87), he looks forward to salvation at the time when the interlocutor would

figuratively sleep on the ground for him. But, as he suggests, this would happen only when a heavenly chariot descended or the snow caught fire—the kind of miracle neither of them believes possible (p. 168). After discovering the interlocutor's profession, Clamence asks him how he succeeded in not risking his life; and the question remains unanswered. Clamence may well be asking the interlocutor how he manages to meet his responsibilities in modern civilization; and the interlocutor does not deign to reply. One last touch concludes the book with a whimper rather than the bang which would have announced Clamence's triumph. Throughout the *récit* Clamence has addressed the interlocutor by a series of such epithets as "ami," "cher ami," or simply, "mon cher"; but at the end he switches to the ambiguous "cher maître." Perhaps explained away as the appropriate title for an attorney, it rather suggests in the context of the whole development that Clamence at last capitulates. As he said at the very beginning: "Nous ne sommes qu'à peu près en toutes choses" (p. 13).

Especially because of Camus's interest in the theater, it may be possible to discuss the structure of *La Chute* in dramatic terms. The six sections take place on five successive days, thereby providing an equivalent of five conventional acts, one of which is in two tableaux. The first "act" consists primarily of exposition; and its conclusion, as the interlocutor visits the prostitutes, could suggest evidence of a flaw in his personality preparing him for a favorable reception of the judge-penitent's message. In the second "act," despite protests, the interlocutor reacts rather favorably to Clamence's subtle rhetoric, and shows interest in the events which precipitated Clamence's fall. At the end of the third "act" comes the climax, when the knot is tied by the interlocutor's admission that he too feels a sense of shame. The fourth "act" opens with a listener who has recovered from his sympathetic attitude and who has apparently analyzed his guilt feelings; yet he is still willing to hear the judge-penitent out. The *dénouement* occurs toward the end of the fifth "act" as the interlocutor's laugh rejects Clamence with his message and retains him in his solitary hell. After a final violent reaction from the *comédien*, the action subsides to a quiet conclusion.

<sup>15</sup> Clamence states that he occasionally triumphs, "l'alcool aidant" (p. 165). But a drunken convert would sober up in the morning, and even Clamence must realize that these conquests are temporary and illusory.



Support for seeing ironic judgment of Clamence within *La Chute* can also be found in the conclusion to earlier drafts. In the first version Clamence is talking his way out of the interlocutor's apparent statement that he will neither arrest Clamence nor begin his own confession: "Mais vous reviendrez de Paris, n'est-ce pas, vous me confesserez votre indignité, il le faut. Pour aujourd'hui dites-moi seulement votre métier. Quoi? Policier? Non, ce n'est pas possible. Non, car voyez-vous, c'est la seule exception. Seul le policier est au-dessus du juge-pénitent et en vérité c'est cela qu'il faudrait être, mais le courage m'a manqué. . . . La prison, c'est ce qu'il me faut, la paix de la prison!"<sup>16</sup> Camus's original and weaker conclusion was apparently that the interlocutor would show his superiority first by revealing his identity as a policeman looking for the stolen painting and then by refusing to exercise his authority. With Camus's device of having Clamence admit his inferiority by acknowledging his inability to assume the role of policeman, the author clearly indicates his first inspiration as a literal and symbolic rejection. In the third version the roles are also reversed, and Camus tries another possible ironic conclusion. As he comments on the falling snow, Clamence seems to be vanquished and asks the interlocutor to depart. Instead of leaving the interlocutor asks a question that disturbs Clamence deeply: "Quoi? Si j'ai risqué ma vie une seule fois? Taisez-vous, ah! taisez-vous, maudit juge!"<sup>17</sup> That the interlocutor now becomes Clamence's judge is degrading enough for him, but that he is actually a *juge d'enfants* provokes a healthy laugh. Moreover, in all three versions, by abjectly pleading for the officer to arrest him, Clamence admits that he would prefer the security of prison to his freedom and the choices it entails. The man who preached the virtues of servitude, of relief from the responsibilities of freedom, now symbolically begs for the comforts of *mauvaise foi*.

The interlocutor has rejected Clamence and what he stands for, but this does not free him from human shortcomings. As Camus himself suggested: "Le miroir dans lequel il se regarde, il finit par le tendre aux autres. Où commence la confession, où l'accusation? Celui qui parle dans ce livre fait-il son procès ou celui de son temps? Est-il un cas particulier, ou l'homme du jour?"

Une seule vérité en tous cas, dans ce jeu de glaces étudié: la douleur et ce qu'elle promet."<sup>18</sup> Camus's statement that the *récit* is a "jeu de glaces" in no way suggests identification of speaker and interlocutor or reader. Each is offered a mirror, not a pane of glass. In that mirror, thanks to Clamence's help, is reflected the individual's attitude toward basic facts of the human condition, and the reader as well as the interlocutor must reassert his own values in the face of an intimidating judge.

The problem of establishing exactly what is rejected, however, remains apparently insoluble because there has been no agreement among groups of critics in the past, and it appears unlikely that there can be any in the future. Elements related to Sartre, Sartrean analyses, and *Les Temps modernes* are discernible throughout Clamence's exposition; yet Marxists, Catholics, liberals, conservatives, Camus's partisans, and Sartre's, all have different vantage points for interpreting the numerous human characteristics which appear in Clamence both to a "normal" degree and to extremes.<sup>19</sup> If agreement cannot be reached on what is rejected, and the author does not intrude to provide explicit guidance, we have a kind of fiction ideally suited to an existentialist age, which demands that the individual create and maintain his own values. Unreliable narration forces the reader to participate in the action, as the interlocutor does, and, in a sense, to create his own work of art. As Gide saw at the beginning of his career, or learned from Dostoevsky or Browning, the first-person, uncontrolled presentation of a flawed consciousness does not degrade the reader. By reasserting his own values as a reaction to the fictional character, the reader proves his superiority and emerges as a true existentialist hero. He is made aware of his limitations, of boundary situations, but also of the intellectual powers to meet them. In this manner, too, Camus has again contributed to his ideal of a society in which the creator will reign instead of the judge.

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<sup>16</sup> *Théâtre*, pp. 2026-27.

<sup>17</sup> *Théâtre*, p. 2028.

<sup>18</sup> *Théâtre*, p. 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. W. D. Redfern, "Camus and Confusion," *Symposium*, xx (Winter 1966), 329-342.