THE CONCEPT OF THE JUDGE-PENITENT OF
ALBERT CAMUS*

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In awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature, 1957 to Albert Camus, the Swedish Academy honored him in the words of Dr. Anders Osterling "... for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our time."1 Throughout his work Camus has sought to redefine moral values in terms acceptable to a world which by its actions has denied the validity of former sources of morality and truth. In Combat he wrote, September, 1945, "... it is a matter of finding out for ourselves whether man, without help of religion or of rationalist thought, can solely by himself create his own values."2 In accepting the Nobel Prize in Stockholm on December 10, 1957, Camus elaborated this definition of the problem confronting his contemporaries. He declared, "As the heir of a corrupt history that blends blighted revolutions, misguided techniques, dead gods, and worn out ideologies, in which second-rate powers can destroy everything today, but are unable to win anyone over, in which intelligence has stooped to becoming the servant of hatred and oppression, that generation, starting from nothing but its own negations, has had to re-establish both within and without itself a little of what constitutes the dignity of life and death."3

For Camus, total negation is the first step toward facing the problem of life and its meaning. Without this negation, which in its totality also includes that of one’s self as an identity, one remains under the deceptive intellectual traditions of the past which assume that the order of the universe is identical with that of human reason. The incompatibility between man’s desire for clear and complete explanations in his own terms and the inability of an irrational world to yield them produces the absurd. In "The Myth of Sisyphus" Camus wrote, "This world in itself is not rational, that is all one can say about it. But what is absurd is the confrontation

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1 Albert Camus, "Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, December 10, 1957" (New York, Knopf, 1958), p. iv. Quoted from the citation read by Dr. Anders Osterling, permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy.
2 Albert Camus, "Actualles I" (Paris, Gallimard, 1950). The quotation is reprinted on page 111.
of this irrationality and of this desperate desire for clarity whose cry resounds in the innermost depths of man. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. It is, for the time being, their only bond."4 The fundamental manifestations of the absurd is man’s aspiration for the eternal and his subordination to duration and death.

Camus finds the meaning of life then can only reside in confronting the absurd and in revolt against it, not in turning away from it. "Now one will not live out this destiny, knowing it to be absurd, unless one does everything possible to keep before oneself this absurdity brought to light by the consciousness of it. To deny one of the terms of this antithesis by which the absurdity lives is to escape from it. To abolish conscious revolt is to evade the problem. The theme of permanent revolt is thus carried into individual experience. To live is to make the absurd live. Making it live is above all looking at it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when one turns away from it."5

For this reason suicide is inadmissible, since it is a conscious avoidance of the total problem. God and other absolutes nullify the contradictions of life by substituting a further inexplicable element. Camus refuses to accept what is beyond his understanding. Since the absurdity of the world is a cruel and hostile force, any subjection to irrationality of any type is an humiliation of the intellect. "I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone. I am still told that intelligence must sacrifice its pride and that reason must humble itself. But if I recognize the limits of reason, I do not deny it by doing so, recognizing its relative powers. I only want to pursue a steady course in this middle road where intelligence can remain clear. If that is its pride, I do not see sufficient reason for giving it up."6

Camus, therefore, remains firmly on the plane of the intellect; and since he cannot get from the world an explanation of the absurdity, he rebels against this humiliation and sets against it his philosophy of revolt, which originates in a primitive feeling of human solidarity and human dignity. This revolt protests against absurdity, cruelty, and injustice and creates a moral value based on suffering. It demands as much liberty as is consistent with the liberty of one’s neighbor. Any attempt to again revert to absolute standards, even of liberty, again produces the absurd in the form of a dictatorship. The rebel must always be prepared to answer the question of how he will deal with the man who opposes him. We have, therefore, the two basic elements of Camus’ philosophy; the confrontation or recognition of the absurd and the revolt against it.

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5 Ibid., p. 76.
6 Ibid., p. 80.
Since Camus has made the absence of values the philosophical center of his work, he cannot accept the absolute moral values of traditional humanism. He is concerned with a restatement of moral values which can be contained within the limits of man’s reason. These moral values must necessarily rise from suffering, since the absurdity of the world is cruel and hostile. Since all men are confronted with the same hostility and cruelty, they are bound to each other in a dual bond; they are the cause of their own suffering; and, through solidarity, the cause of their own moral judgments. But to achieve that solidarity through recognition of guilt and acceptance of penance, man must first examine his conscience.

This examination of conscience is the motivating force of The Fall. The concept of the judge-penitent is a facet of this examination of conscience.

In reading this récit of Camus, we find that he is interpreting Judeo-Christian concepts in contemporary tones. In this sense, this work becomes highly symbolical, and we must recognize ideals of the New Testament enveloped in the cloak of the liberal humanism of Camus.

In three of Christ’s parables presented as an integral unit of the fifteenth chapter of Saint Luke, that of the lost sheep, the prodigal son, and the lost coin, the lesson is clearly drawn that man must lose himself before he can enter the Kingdom of Heaven, that he must deny his own nature of self-interest to find himself again as a living testimony of the love of God and the love of neighbor. The first Christian symbol of this “losing of self” was John the Baptist, a voice crying in the wilderness. John had the opportunities of birth, as the son of a priest, which would have insured him a substantial and respected place in life. He chose, however, to retire to the wilderness and, in a state of abject humility, to call man to a life of repentance, in other words, to an examination of the real value of the individual in defining the meaning of life. The two concepts of penance, which is a form of suffering, and of judgment embodied in John the Baptist are the foundation of The Fall and its cultural theme of the judge-penitent.

The Fall is a monologue of self-accusation by the character Jean-Baptiste Clamence to a chance acquaintance encountered in the Mexico City Bar in Amsterdam. The symbolism of the first name Jean-Baptiste, John the Baptist, is readily apparent. The invention of the last name on the root of the Latin verb clamare (to call or to cry out) reinforces the conviction that Camus was intent on re-interpreting the Christian Biblical missionary. Clamence is also a bachelor with no emotional ties binding him to anyone. The Biblical wilderness was the physical means of divesting man of his material ties. In the same manner, the Mexico City Bar in Amsterdam is the symbol of the divorce from materialism. Those who frequent this
bar "come from the four corners of Europe and stop facing the inner sea, on the drab strand. They listen to the foghorns, vainly try to make out the silhouettes of boats in the fog, then turn back over the canals and go home through the rain. Chilled to the bone, they come and ask in all languages for gin at Mexico City." "Fortunately there is gin, the sole glimmer of light in this darkness."  

Clamence is a former Parisian lawyer who had risen to a great success in his profession by mastering the art of parading self-interest as virtue. He had by studied effort brought himself to a perfect state of harmony with life. Being on the summits, on the right side of the law, self-indulgent, though esteemed by all, Clamence considered himself above judgment. This was the absolute value to which he attached himself, one to which he believed himself designated and for which he was peculiarly favored. Contented with his virtues, Clamence did not concern himself with the idea that he could be judged by others. He completes the summation of his character in these words, "I admitted only superiorities in me and this explained my good will and serenity. When I was concerned with others, I was so out of pure condescension, in utter freedom, and all credit went to me: my self-esteem would go up a degree."  

Though Clamence felt himself free, he did not realize that freedom demanded responsibility and that the exercise of freedom involves the judgment of each action evolving from it. While crossing the Pont Royal one night, he passed behind a feminine figure leaning on the railing and staring at the river. After he had crossed the bridge, he heard the sound of a body striking the water and later a cry, repeated several times, which was going downstream; then it suddenly ceased. In this instant Clamence was confronted with the need of making a decision, to save the woman or do nothing. This decision was forced upon him from without the framework of his personality and his virtue. He chose to do nothing. However, this inaction was an exercise of his freedom and the consequent fate of the woman, whether she lived or died, emanated from this exercise of freedom. Even such an excuse as "too late" or "too far" did not relieve him of responsibility in the life of this woman. 

But Clamence was aware of the change in his life. He was now subject to judgment. As a result of this incident, he found himself insecure and questioning himself and his virtue. He had discovered the fact that freedom and responsibility were not separable. He had fallen from his summit, and his fall was this discovery of the responsibility of freedom.

*Albert Camus, "La Chute" (Paris, Gallimard, 1956), "The Fall", translated by Justin O'Brien (New York, Knopf, 1956), p 15. All following citations are from this translation.

* Ibid., p. 12.

The further realization of Clamence was that the exercise of this responsibility was being judged by others. This realization is symbolized by his sensitivity to laughter which he heard on the dark foggy streets of Paris at night. Finally when in an altercation with a motorcyclist, he is struck and does not retaliate, he realizes that he is no longer the physical master of his well being. These episodes led him to distrust his physical and spiritual contentment. This distrust was in itself an act of judgment which awakened in him the realization that no one is innocent and that he too was being judged or accused and, therefore, was on the side of the guilty. This realization of lack of innocence, this change of status and the full awareness of its implications, is also part of the fall of Adam. In the Garden of Eden, Adam also learned that the exercise of a free choice carried with it inescapable responsibility which placed him among the guilty also. But just as Adam attempted to disclaim responsibility by turning to Eve, so Clamence attempted to find freedom without responsibility in debauchery or giving himself entirely into the power of his senses.

"...true debauchery," he comments, "is liberating because it creates no obligations. In it you possess only yourself; hence it remains the favorite pastime of the great lovers of their own person. It is a jungle without past or future, without any promise above all, nor any immediate penalty. The places where it is practiced are separated from the world. On entering, one leaves behind fear and hope." But again the world crowded in on him, and the image of the woman drowning in the Seine came back. And so Clamence had to come to terms with his "little-ease", "malcontent". Camus takes the instrument of torture of the Middle Ages, the cell in which a man could neither stand nor lie down, as the restriction which encompasses man and makes him realize guilt.

"Moreover, we cannot assert the innocence of anyone, whereas we can state with certainty the guilt of all. Every man testifies to the crime of all the others—that is my faith and my hope...God is not needed to create guilt or to punish. Our fellow men suffice, aided by ourselves."

The bond of guilt which the fall of Adam established for all mankind is the identical one which the responsibility of freedom has forged. Even the innocence of Christ in the eyes of Camus is compromised by the "Slaughter of the Innocents", for which He was in a measure responsible, when his parents sought refuge for Him in Egypt. So too the concept of the "just judge" is a fraud. For Camus the judge sits above the guilty not the innocent. He portrays this idea symbolically in the stolen picture of "The Just
Judges” by Van Eyck, which had formed one of the panels of “The Adoration of the Lamb,” set in the altar of the St. Bavon Cathedral of Ghent. In The Fall this painting is now stored in the closet of Clamenc after having hung for some time in the Mexico City Bar, while in the cathedral altar a copy of the original painting substitutes fraudulent judges approaching the innocent lamb. For Clamence the balance of life is thus restored. He says, “Finally, because this way everything is in harmony. Justice being definitely separated from innocence—the latter on the cross and the former in the cupboard—I have the way clear to work according to my convictions.”

Thus Clamence, as an individual who has a full realization of his responsibility in the exercise of freedom without any security in the old virtue from which he had fallen, is fully experienced to judge others, to accuse them in their exercise of freedom with responsibility.

Clamence is the mirror of our times, the figure of ourselves. He says “... I adapt my words to my listener and lead him to go me one better. I mingle what concerns me and what concerns others. I choose the features we have in common, the experiences we have endured together, the failings we share—good form, in other words, the man of the hour as he is ripe in me and in others. With all that I construct a portrait of all and of no one. A mask, in short, rather like those carnival masks which are both lifelike and stylized, so that they make people say: ‘Why surely I’ve met him.’ When the portrait is finished, as it is this evening, I show it with great sorrow. ‘This, alas, is what I am!’ The prosecutor’s charge is finished. But at the same time the portrait I hold out to my contemporaries becomes a mirror.”

The judge-penitent of Camus is his interpretation of the contemporary liberal humanist. The study of man, conceived as a complete secular being, leads him to the conclusion that man is the cause of his own suffering and guilt, which can be alleviated only to the degree that each individual, through a complete denial of self-interest, attains the right to judge the responsible exercise of freedom in others. Justice and innocence are non-existent. Humanity to move upward toward the summits must become its own judge-penitent. The democracy of guilt will engender between men that solidarity which will enable them to continue the quest for harmony with life.

For Albert Camus the concept of the judge-penitent is the fundamental and complete explanation of man in all ages. Through Adam, as the figure of the first man, the universality of the guilt of man-

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12 Ibid., p. 130.
13 Ibid., pp. 139–140.
kind became established in the Judaic tradition at its inception. In like manner John the Baptist inaugurated the Christian era with the same cry of accusation, "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the wrath that is coming?"14 Both these patriarchs experienced the complete loss of self-interest in finding the meaning of the solidarity of mankind.

The intensity of this struggle for spiritual solidarity with man and against spiritual isolation by being bereft of it arises from the precarious balance upon which the life of the individual is poised. The slightest misconception of one's own nature at any given moment can plunge one into a tragic impasse. In the concept of Camus it is only the true judge-penitent who is within reach of this kingdom, which has been promised to men of all ages from Adam to John the Baptist to Jean-Baptiste Clamence.
