

"VOX CLAMANTIS" IN CAMUS' LA CHUTE

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The crying voice of Jean-Baptiste Clamence expresses fully the essence of the Camusian revolt. La Chute of Camus seeks a way out of the Inferno into which its protagonist seems to have fallen forever. It is a protest against all organized religion, pharisaism and dogmatism because of the judgment and tyranny implied in these systems. It is a voice echoing the words of the Baptist: "I must decrease, He must increase."¹ Through the technique of the enigma, through a game of masks and mirrors, Camus leads us into a detective story where we constantly must be on our guard. Who is Jean-Baptiste Clamence? What is the message of his well "calculated" and "oriented" confession in an ill-reputed bar named "Mexico City" in Amsterdam, Holland?

It seems important to look back at the mood of the author when composing La Chute, and to give a quick glance at the events that influenced and brought about the publication of the book as a separate work from L'Exil et le Royaume (as these two works were originally destined to be part of the same collection). La Chute "appears" to be one of the most negative works of Camus. It is a story of a very depressed man, crying out in a sarcastic tone his

guilt as well as that of mankind. The quarrel Camus-Sartre, Jeanson, had caused great pain to our author. He had publicly been attacked, judged and humiliated by what he considered to be his personal friends. The Algerian dilemma had also been a personal tragedy in which Camus, refusing to choose between "justice and his mother" (she resided in Algeria), had once again been judged and condemned by both sides. To the preoccupation of his health, always fragile, were now added the worries of two sick women so close to him: his mother and his daughter. The autobiographical references in La Chute are many and we cannot avoid recognizing in one of the many faces reflected in Clamence a Camus in his early forties, the man he was and the man he pretended to be.

The protagonist of La Chute reflects in fact a multitude of faces. He identifies himself: a comedian, an ex-lawyer, a penitent-judge, a preacher, a prophet as well as an impostor, a pope, Christ, and a God. The name he uses is Jean-Baptiste Clamence which, he states, is not his real name, for reasons unknown to the reader. He changed his name when he moved to Amsterdam to practice his profession of "penitent-judge." He never gives us his real name. Two notions are introduced with this "borrowed" name: the notion of falsehood - he is not what he claims to be - and the attempt to transform his person - he feels the need of a change of identity. He quotes: "But when you don't like your own life, when you know that you must change lives ... what can one do to become another?"²

In introducing himself, he shows us his visiting card saying:

"Jean-Baptiste Clamence, comédien." He therefore portrays himself as an actor, capable of playing any role. Figuratively speaking, he is a hypocrite who imitates feelings that are not his own. His home bears the sign: "Ne vous y fiez pas!", an expression of distrust.

He declares himself to be an ex-lawyer from Paris. If Clamence claims to love heights and summits, it is not by mere coincidence. In his lawyer's robe, in a balcony, he resembles an actor on a stage. The scene sets him well above others, "the human ants," to use his expression, permitting him to dominate as well as to judge those below him. He declares: "After all, living aloft is still the only way of being seen and hailed by the largest number."³ If Paris is a foremost exemplar of European civilization, the "City of Lights," to Clamence it is a real "trompe l'oeil," an illusion, a bluff. The decor he was used to turns out to be in fact a disillusion. Surrounded and admired by what he considered his "friends," he suddenly feels threatened, vulnerable and open to public accusation. "The circle of which I was the center broke and they lined up in a row as on the judges' benches,"⁴ he says. The vocation came to him then to become a "penitent-judge"; a double profession permitting him as a penitent to confess his sins, and as a judge to bring about a judgment not only upon himself, but on society as a whole. Describing his profession Clamence quotes: "It consists to begin

with, as you know from experience, in indulging in public confession as often as possible. I accuse myself up and down I don 't accuse myself crudely, beating my breast. No, I navigate skillfully, multiplying distinctions and digressions, too. In short, I adapt my words to my listener. ... I choose the features we have in common, the experiences we have endured together, the failings we share ... with all that I construct a portrait which is the image of all and no one."⁵ The portrait that Camence draws is, in fact, a caricature of what he defines as "modern man," who "fornicate[s] and read[s] the newspapers." But in order for Clamence to bring about this judgment he has to elevate himself to the position of a judge. His game is very clever and two-fold. In "accusing" and "judging" himself, he very skillfully abstracts his own person from judgment of others, thus protecting himself. In "judging" society, he makes himself equal to those who had judged him. The accusation standing against him is simply that he is "a man," an imperfect being full of passions. In his Preface to L'Envers et l'endroit, Camus had quoted: "To dream of morality when one is a man of passion, is to devote oneself to injustice at the same time that one speaks of justice." Had not his own body been the cause of Clamence's crime in La Chute? If he had refused to save the woman from drowning while in Paris it was because the water represented a threat. It was his body that had stopped him, while his mind was telling him to save her. But the water was "too cold," he explains.

As a lawyer in Paris, he had dreamed and pretended to be simple, that the world was simple and that he held a certain truth. Therefore, he had fabricated for himself a code of ethics, a doctrine to live by and to preach to others as a good disciple. The peers he left behind still felt they were the guardians of truth. We can here recognize Sartre and followers who, to Camus' eyes, too indoctrinated by their own beliefs had become his judges -- the righteous judges, an image which echoes throughout the book. During his "confession," Jean-Baptist Clamence talks about a mysterious painting which he unveils to us at the end of the book. It is the famous painting of Van Eyck, the Adoration of the Lamb, also called the Ghent Altarpiece, a very complex work of art. The picture is composed of several panels with interior and exterior façades. Its symbolism is great and it is directly related to the novel. It depicts the Fall and Redemption of Man.⁶ John the Baptist, whose name is used for the protagonist of the novel, is portrayed twice. First, in the interior façade of the painting, in the top middle panel, sitting to the left of God. To the right of the Father we see the Virgin Mary. The Baptist occupies there the highest position next to Mary. We find him once again in the bottom left panel, on the exterior façade, on the reverse side of the Righteous Judges -- a panel which was actually stolen from St. Bavon Cathedral in 1934. Only half the panel was later returned to the authorities, the side with John the Baptist. The other side, portraying the Righteous

Judges, was never found and today it is replaced by a copy. It is curious that Clamence claims to have the original locked in his room, in a cabinet. Throughout his confession, Clamence expresses a certain hate for all sorts of judges. He cannot understand, he declares, how anyone can assume that position. As a lawyer he had refused, like Christ, to judge and condemn others. Now threatened, he feels the need, like everyone else, to judge because, after all, he too holds a certain truth - in his own way he is a prophet.

His name is most intriguing, as it not only creates many echoes, but it is also deeply inbedded in religion. Jean, from the Hebrew Johanna and Latin Johannes, means the "gift" or "grace of God," "Jehovah has favored" and "God is gracious." "Jo" is the abbreviation of "Jehovah" or "Jahveh," the proper name of God in Hebrew, the equivalent in Greek being "Eli" or "Elijah." Curious coincidence, the name "Jahveh" sounds like the Spanish word "llave" meaning "key," and we are all aware that Camus was quite familiar with his mother's native language. "Jean" is the name of St. John the Evangelist, as well as that of St. John the Baptist.

Our hero's last name, Clamence, also raises many questions. From the Latin "clamare," meaning to cry out, to protest, the name Clamence projects the phonetic sound in French [Klamãs] which can be easily confused with [Klemãs], Clemence, meaning clemency, or [Klemã], Clément, which is the name used by many popes in history. Clamence tells us, in fact, that he was once appointed pope, while he was taken

prisoner by the Germans and put into a concentration camp. He confesses that being pope is not as easy as he had previously thought it would be. He actually found that, during his papacy, it was impossible to maintain complete equality among his comrades. "He closed the circle" he admits, "the day [he] drank the water of a dying comrade ... convincing [himself] that the others needed [him] more than this fellow who was going to die anyway and that [he] had the duty to keep [himself] alive for them." ⁷ Quite an antithesis of sacrifice. It was then that he understood that "one must forgive the pope!" ⁸ And the pope he seems to refer to is Pius XII, who during World War II believed that the Vatican could best work to achieve peace by maintaining formal relations with all sides. He was very much criticized for not speaking out against the Nazi persecution of the Jews and was accused of not doing enough to protect them - the same accusations that Camus had suffered regarding the Algerian War. The identification with the pope is significant. Like the pope, guardian of religion, and most direct representative of Christ on Earth, Camus claimed to be infallible, a notion which he questions by declaring that the pope too needed to be forgiven.

It is with some reservations that we give the remainder of the data regarding the name Camus, but we feel it worth mentioning. Camus [Klamaz] is also a small town in the French department of Marne, "arrondissement" of Chalons-Sur-Marne. It was in the battle of the Marne that Camus' father was killed during World War I. As we all know, the quest of a father, with all its images, has been,

throughout his works, a certain obsession for our author.

Looking back at the entire name of our hero, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, it is interesting to note that Jean-Baptiste Clément is the name of a revolutionary born in Boulogne-Sur-Seine in 1837. A political as well as a literary figure, he was a socialist who was very active in the "Commune" of Paris . He had also collaborated on the magazine of Jules Vallès called "Le Cri du Peuple" or "the cry of the people." Having composed many poems in favor of the working class, like Camus, he was called the "poet of the people."

It is the figure of the prophet that calls our attention the most. The name itself can be read as the "crying voice of John the Baptist," or "the crying voice of the desert" -- the desert symbolized by the Baptist as well as by Amsterdam, place of exile chosen by Clamence. When searching for a title for the book, Camus had thought of "Le cri," but changed his mind when he heard that Antonioni had just named his movie "Le cri." ⁹ Other titles considered were: "Le jugement dernier," "Un héros de notre temps," "Un puritain de notre temps," and "L'ordre du jour." ¹⁰ It was finally Martin du Gard who found the definite title to the book: "La Chute!" ¹¹

Clamence, talking about his origins, states "I was of respectable but obscure birth (my father was an officer), and yet certain mornings, let me confess it humbly, I felt like a king's son, or a burning bush." ¹² In claiming his birth was somewhat obscure,

Clarence evokes the thought of the Baptist. According to the Scriptures, the prophet's birth was announced by an Angel and he was then conceived by the Holy Spirit, as his mother, Elizabeth, already of a certain age, was considered infertile. Like the Christ's, his birth has been considered somewhat divine. Several times the Baptist had been asked if he were Christ or the prophet Eli -- something which he always denied. He was only a friend of the "bridegroom." In his own way, Clarence also claims to be a prophet, a false prophet, as well as a friend of Christ. He quotes: "In solitude and when fatigued, one is after all inclined to take oneself for a prophet. When all is said and done, that's really what I am, having taken refuge in a desert of stones, fogs and stagnant waters -- an empty prophet for shabby times, Elijah without a messiah, ... my finger raised toward a threatening sky, showering imprecations on lawless men who cannot endure my judgement."¹³ And again, at the end of his confession, he also talks about "[his] career of a false prophet crying in the wilderness and refusing to come forth."¹⁴ As John the Baptist is often portrayed wrapped in camel skin, clothing of the ancient prophets, so Clarence also talks about "the camel that provided the hair for [his] overcoat."¹⁵ Like the prophet, he has studied and practiced the Holy Scriptures; he has meditated considerably on man and his condition. He can claim to be an authority figure on morality. Quite often, Clarence admits, he has

been mistaken for a teacher or a doctor. The great doctrine which the Baptist practiced was "repentance." He had a very austere life of prayer and sacrifice, the same vigorous life that Clamence claims to have practiced in Paris.

The baptism practiced by the prophet differs from the sort of ceremony performed by Jesus and his disciples. It consisted mainly of a "confession" and a washing of the body. It is important to note that the required confession of baptism, which took place at an adult age, was not a pure confession as we understand it nowadays. It was a cleansing and confirmation of one's state of mind. It was more a profession of one's faith. In many ways, it resembles Clamence's confession, if we may call it so. Camus had in fact confided to his friend Maria Casarès that Clamence's discourse was not a "real" confession, but the "spirit of the time, rather the confused spirit of the time."¹⁵ As lucid as Clamence may appear, he is also very contradictory as the portrait that he makes of himself is quite confused and ambiguous. The purpose of his confession is actually to recognize his own status -- a man with all of his weaknesses and contradictions, and to confirm his belief which is the duplicity as opposed to the simplicity of man. The prophetic words of the Baptist: "I must decrease as He must increase" are quite significant in the sense that the mission of Clamence is to decrease the false "(god)" image that he has or had of himself in order to let the true "god" (the man that he is with all his

weaknesses) increase. We must remember that for Clamence the search of the sacred is within man and not within God.

As precursor of the Messiah, the Baptist's principal task was to announce the arrival of Jesus Christ and to baptize him. In a certain sense Jesus' baptism takes place in view of his own death -- the death of a man-God -- who has been chosen to die for the sins of mankind. His death in itself will later become another baptism. If many critics have seen in Clamence the fall of a man and mankind, La Chute is above all the fall of a god, a false god, to give birth once again to Man. Clamence's fall becomes in its own way a kind of baptism, where, like Christ, he offers himself as sacrifice. His confession has a two-fold mission. It is in destroying his image of a self-proclaimed god that Clamence completes the portrait of Man, thus accomplishing his Redemption.

His identification to Janus, a pagan god, and to Christ, man made god, is not without importance in the sense that he is always putting forth the image of a false god, never acknowledging the existence of a true and only God. Christ, according to Clamence, was not as perfect as everyone thought him to be. Had he not been the cause, even if indirectly, of the massacre of the children of Judea? Had he not doubted, had he not cried his agony on the cross? "He was not superhuman, you can believe me," states Clamence, "he cried aloud his agony and that's why I love him, my friend who died without knowing." ¹⁷ The many allusions that he makes in

identifying himself with God: "I looked upon myself as something of a superman,"¹⁸ and "I felt like a king's son, or a burning bush,"¹⁹ or "I am the end and the beginning,"²⁰ remain only allusions, metaphors or comparisons affirming the reality that he only "feels" like a God, but cannot "be" a God.

Clamence seems to prefer the face of a Janus, a pagan and double-faced god, who is watching all sides of his temple. Its doors are open in time of war and closed in time of peace. The comparison is most interesting because Clamence claims his church is Mexico-City, an ill-reputed bar in the heart of Amsterdam, frequented by sailors and people of many races -- a real tower of Babel, to use Clamence's own words. Roger Quilliot states that the bar existed at 94, Warmoe-Shaat in Amsterdam, and that its name has changed.²¹ Herbert Lottman in a recent biography of Camus mentions that the bar in La Chute is the combination of two different bars, next to each other, one called Saloon Mexico and the other City Café. Mexico City becomes an intriguing combination when we analyze the words that compose it. "Mexico" from the Aztec means "place of the war god." "Mexitel," also known as "Huitzilopochti," was the god of the Aztecs. The suffix co-refers to a place, in this case the temple of Mexitel from which the surrounding City of Mexico takes its name.

Clamence's face seems to become more human, but not less complex, when he describes himself as half Cerdan, half de Gaulle.

Cerdan, a famous boxing champion, made his law with his fist. De Gaulle, a very fatherly figure and great thinker, was also a military man and a tyrant. If both men portray a certain violence they also exemplify strength. Very cleverly, our protagonist manages to put us in a setting of gods, violence and war.

Amsterdam, a city of waters, the setting in which the "confession" or "baptism" takes place, seems to fit Clamence's intentions perfectly. Amsterdam, meaning "the dam on the river Amstel," is for him a closed Inferno. He describes it as ".... the most beautiful negative landscape. ... A soggy hell, indeed! Everything horizontal, no relief; space is colorless, and life is dead." ²² Once again there are many references and allusions to the Scriptures. If Christ was baptized in the waters of the Jordan river, near its entrance into the Dead Sea, Clamence brings us to the Zuider Zee, which he describes as a "dead sea, or almost, lost in the fog." ²³ In one of the quarters of Amsterdam we find the region called De Jordaan, which evokes once again the river Jordan. The nucleus of the city appears as a large square, named Dam. In the middle of the square stands a monument called the Metal Cross. Clamence claims to live in Amsterdam in a famous square where thousands of Jews had been massacred. The entire city lies on a marshy land slightly below sea level; most of Holland is below sea-level. The word Holland is thought to be a corruption of Holt-land (it was sometimes so spelt by 13th Century writers) to signify

wood-land. The earliest spelling is, however, Holland which means lowly-land (Hol = hollow). The country, subject to perpetual variation of the sea-coast because of erosion, forces its people to constantly modify and conform to the physical character of the country. As much of an Inferno as the city and country may appear to be, it is in Amsterdam though that Clamence accomplishes his miracle of redemption.

Soon after the completion of La Chute, Roger Guilliot received a copy of the book with the following dedication: "To Roger Quilliot, to justify his prophecy." ²¹. Earlier Quilliot had written: "Let us be prepared ... for an 'opportunistic' reaction against moralism and abstraction, to which the necessities of the struggle had constrained him" Camus had in fact just added to his very first work, L'Envers et l'endroit, a lengthy preface in which he felt the need to explain himself; he openly stated his desire and ambition to start all over so that he might once again be confronted with the duplicity of the world. He longed for the feeling of innocence which was present in his early heroes, and which seems to be lost forever in La Chute. But if Amsterdam at first glance appears as a closed Inferno, it is in this city of fog and water that Clamence accomplishes his miracle -- the redemption of man in the secular sense.

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NOTES

1. John 3:30.
2. Albert Camus, The Fall, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1959), p. 150.
3. Ibid., p. 25.
4. Ibid., p. 78.
5. Ibid., p. 133.
6. Jeffrey Meyers, "Camus' The Fall and Van Eyck's 'The Adoration of the Lamb,'" Mosaic, VII: 3 (1974), p. 43.
see also:
Erwin Panofsky, "The Problem of the Ghent Altarpiece," Early Netherlandish Painting (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 212.
7. The Fall, pp. 126, 127.
8. Ibid., p. 127.
9. Herbert R. Lottman, Albert Camus, trans. Marianne Véron (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978), p. 570.
10. Idem.
11. Idem.
12. The Fall, p. 33.
13. Ibid., p. 123.
14. Ibid., p. 152
15. Ibid., p. 13.
16. Herbert R. Lottmann, Albert Camus, p. 573.
17. The Fall, p. 114.

18. Ibid., p. 28.
19. Ibid., p. 29.
20. Ibid., p. 118.
21. Roger Quilliot, La Mer et les prisons (Editions Gallimard, 1970), pp. 259-279.
22. The Fall, p. 72.
23. Ibid., p. 37.
24. Roger Quilliot, La Mer et les prisons, p. 261; (my translation)
25. Idem.; (my translation)