I HAVE always pictured Meursault as a stranger to the sentiments of other men. Love and hatred, ambition and envy, greed and jealousy are equally foreign to him. He attends the funeral of his mother as impassively as he watches, on the following day, a Fernandel movie. Eventually, Meursault kills a man, but how could I feel that he is a real criminal? How could this man have any motive for murder?

Meursault is the fictional embodiment of the nihilistic individualism expounded in Le Mythe de Sisyphe and commonly referred to as l’absurde. Meursault is possessed by this absurde as others, in a different spiritual context, are possessed by religious grace. But the word absurde is not really necessary; the author himself, in his preface to the Brée-Lynes edition of the novel, defines his hero as a man “who does not play the game.” Meursault “refuses to lie” and, immediately, “society feels threatened.” This hero has a positive significance, therefore; he is not an épuvé, a derelict; “he is a man poor and naked who is in love with the sun.”

It is easy to oppose L’Etranger to a novel like Crime and Punishment. Dostoevsky approves the sentence which condemns his hero, whereas Camus disapproves. L’Etranger must be a work of innocence and generosity, soaring above the morass of a guilt-ridden literature. But the problem is not so simple as it looks. Meursault is not the only character in the novel. If he is innocent, the judges who sentence him are guilty. The presentation of the trial as a parody of justice contains at least an implicit indictment of the judges. Many critics have made this indictment explicit and so has Camus himself in the preface to the American edition of L’Etranger. After presenting the death of his hero as the evil fruit of an evil collectivity, the author concludes: “In our society, a man who does not cry at the funeral of his mother is likely to be sentenced to death.” This striking sentence is really a quotation from an earlier statement; it is labeled “paradoxical,” but it is nevertheless repeated with the obvious intent to clear all possible misunderstanding as to an interpretation of L’Etranger which, in a sense, is beyond questioning.

The American edition of L’Etranger was published in 1955 and La Chute in 1956. A fashionable Parisian lawyer named Clamence has made a great reputation defending those criminals whom he could, somehow, picture as victims of the “judges.” Clamence has a very high opinion of himself because he has always sided with the “underdog” against the iniquitous “judges.” One day, however, he discovers that moral heroism is not so easily achieved in deeds as it is in words and a process of soul searching begins which leads which the “generous lawyer” to abandon his successful career and take refuge in Amsterdam. Clamence realizes that mercy, in his hands, was a secret weapon against the unmerciful, a more complex form of self-righteousness. His real desire was not to save his clients but to prove his moral superiority by discrediting the judges. Clamence, in other words, had been the type of lawyer whom Salinger’s hero, in the Catcher in the Rye, would hate to become:

Lawyers are all right . . . if they go around saving innocent guys’ lives all the time, and like that, but you don’t do that kind of stuff if you’re a lawyer . . . And besides. Even if you did go around saving guys’ lives, and all, how would you know if you did it because you really wanted to save guys’ lives, or because what you really wanted to do was be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over . . . How would you know you weren’t being a phony? The trouble is, you wouldn’t.

The “generous lawyer” wants to be above everybody else and to sit in judgment over the judges themselves; he is a judge in disguise. Unlike the ordinary judges who judge directly and openly, he judges indirectly and deviously. When anti-pharisaism is used as a device to crush the Pharisees, it becomes another and more vicious form of pharisaism. This point is a pertinent one, especially in our time, but it is not new and it would not be so striking if Camus, in order to make it, did not return to the themes and symbols of his earlier works and in particular of L’Etranger.

In La Chute as in L’Etranger, we have a court, we have a trial, we have the accused and, of course, we have the inevitable judges. The only new character is the generous lawyer himself who defends his “good criminals” just as Camus, the novelist, defended Meursault in L’Etranger. The good criminals lose their cases, and so did Meursault, but the loss, in either case, is more than regained in the wider court of public opinion. When we read L’Etranger, we feel pity for Meursault and anger at his judges, the very sentiments which the “generous lawyer” is supposed
to derive from his practice of the law.

The pre-Chute Camus is quite different, of course, from his hero Clamence, but the two have a common trait in their contempt for the “judges.” Both of them have built an intellectually complex and a socially successful life around this one hallowed principle. The contemporary advocate of literary “revolt” is perpetually challenging social institutions and values, but his challenge, like that of the lawyer, has become a part of the institutions themselves; far from entailing any personal risks, his activities bring fame and comfort in their wake.

If Camus had conceived any doubts as to the validity of his ethical attitude and if he had wanted to express these doubts in another work of fiction, he could not have hit upon a more appropriate theme than that of La Chute. All the earlier works of the author are based upon the explicit or implicit tenet that a systematic hostility to all “judges” provides the surest foundation for an “authentic” ethical life. La Chute openly derides this tenet. It is natural, therefore, to conclude that the work contains an element of self-criticism.1 It is no less natural to reject a conclusion which threatens all established ideas concerning Camus, the writer and the man.

We live in an age of middle-class “individualism” in which self-consistency is rated as a major virtue. But a thinker is not bound by the same rules as a statesman or a banker. We do not think less of Goethe because he repudiated Werther. We do not blush at the thought of Rimbaud repudiating his whole work, or of Kafka refusing to have his manuscripts published at the time of his death. Progress in matters of the spirit is often a form of self-destruction; it may entail a violent reaction against the past. If an artist has to keep admiring his own works at all times in order to maintain his manuscripts published at the time of his death. Progress in matters of the spirit is often a form of self-destruction; it may entail a violent reaction against the past. If an artist has to keep admiring his own works at all times in order to remain admirable, Monsieur Joseph Prud’homme, the caricatural French bourgeois, is certainly greater than Pascal, Racine, Chateaubriand, or Claudel.

A writer’s creative process has become a major, if not the major literary theme of our time. The lawyer of La Chute, like the doctor of La Peste, is, at least to a certain extent, an allegory of the creator. Can this assertion be denied on the grounds that it involves a “naive confusion” between the author and his fictional work? Fear of the “biographical fallacy” must not be an excuse to evade the truly significant problems raised by literary creation. This fear is itself naive because it conceives the rapport between an author and his work as an all or nothing proposition. When I say that Clamence is Albert Camus, I do not mean that the two are identical in the sense that an original document is identical to its carbon copy, or that a traveler is identical to the snapshot which figures on the first page of his passport. When a work is really profound, the existential significance of its characters and situations can never be stated in terms of straight biography, but why should it have to be so stated?

I may admit that Camus’s past is present in La Chute and still evade the most difficult consequences of this discovery. By placing the emphasis upon the political and social allusions, I may interpret the confession of Clamence as an attack against whatever is implied in the word engagement. Camus’s quarrel with Sartre as well as his restrained public attitude during the last years of his life could provide some additional evidence for this view. If La Chute is a reaction against the recent past only, is it not, as such, a return to the earlier past and a vigorous—if enigmatic—re-statement of the positions defended in Sisyphe and L’Etranger? This minimal interpretation is attractive; unfortunately, it rests not on internal evidence but on the implicit assumption that Camus’s entire itinerary can and must be defined in terms of that engagement/dégagement polarity which reigned supreme a dozen years ago. The trouble with this polarity is that it excludes the one possibility which is actually realized in La Chute, that of a change in vision radical enough to transcend both the engagement of La Peste and the dègagement of L’Etranger.

Engagement can rarely be distinguished from the other targets of satire in La Chute because, from the standpoint of Clamence, it no longer constitutes a truly autonomous attitude. The first Camus, as well as the later advocate of engagement, can fit the description of the “generous lawyer.” The only difference is that the “clients” are characters of fiction in the first case and real human beings in the second. From the cynical perspective of Clamence, this difference is unimportant. To the generous lawyer, the clients are never quite real since they are not an end in themselves, but they are never quite fictional since they are a means to discredit the judges. Engagement represents only a variation on the theme of “bad faith,” one of the many forms which a secretly self-seeking dedication to the

downtrodden can assume. Behind the clients, therefore, we can see the characters created by the early Camus, such as Caligula, the two women murderers in *Le Malentendu*, and, pre-eminently, Meursault, no less than the real but shadowy people whose cause a writer is supposed to embrace when he becomes *engagé*

The passage in which Clamence describes his kindness to old ladies in distress and other such people is, probably, the one direct reference to *engagement* in *La Chute*. And we may note that this boy-scoutish behavior is presented to us as nothing more than an extension of the lawyer's professional attitude. Clamence has become so engrossed in his legal self that he goes on playing the part of the generous lawyer outside of the court; the comedy gradually takes over even the most ordinary circumstances of daily life. Literature and life have become one, not because literature imitates life but because life imitates literature. Unity of experience is achieved at the level of an all-pervasive imposture.

*La Chute* must be read in the right perspective, which is one of humor. The author, tired of his popularity with all the *bien-pensants* of the intellectual élite, found a witty way to deride his quasi-prophetic role without scandalizing the pure at heart among the faithful. Allowance must be made for overstatement, but the work cannot be discounted as a joke or safely extolled as art for art's sake. The confession of Clamence is Camus's own, in a broad literary and spiritual sense. To prove this point, I shall turn first to *L'Étranger* and uncover a structural flaw which, to my knowledge, has not been previously detected. The significance of that structural flaw will provide the evidence we need to confirm the reading of *La Chute* as self-criticism.

On the purely phenomenological level, Meursault's condemnation is almost unrelated to his crime. Every detail of the trial adds up to the conclusion that the judges resent the murderer not for what he did but for what he is. The critic Albert Maquet expressed this truth quite well when he wrote: "The murder of the Arab is only a pretext; behind the person of the accused, the judges want to destroy the truth he embodies."

Let there be no murder and a good pretext to get rid of Meursault will, indeed, have been lost, but a pretext should be easy to replace, precisely because it does not have to be good. If society is as eager to annihilate Meursault as it is pictured by Maquet, the remarkable existence of this hero should provide more "pretexts" than will ever be needed to send an innocent to his doom.

Is this assumption well founded? We ask this question in all awareness that we are abandoning, for the time being, pure literary phenomenology for common sense realism. If we feel, when we are reading the novel, that Meursault lives dangerously, this impression evaporates under examination. The man goes to work regularly; he swims on the beaches of the Mediterranean and he has dates with the girls in the office. He likes the movies but he is not interested in politics. Which of these activities will take him to a police station, let alone the guillotine?

Meursault has no responsibilities, no family, no personal problems; he feels no sympathy for unpopular causes. Apparently he drinks nothing but *café au lait*. He really lives the prudent and peaceful life of a little bureaucrat anywhere and of a French petit bourgeois into the bargain. He carries the foresight of his class so far that he waits the medically recommended number of hours after his noontime meal before he plunges into the Mediterranean. His way of life should constitute a good insurance against nervous breakdowns, mental exhaustion, heart failure, and, *a fortiori*, the guillotine.

Meursault, it is true, does not cry at his mother's funeral, and this is the one action in his life which is likely to be criticized by his neighbors; from such criticism to the scaffold, however, there is a distance which could never be bridged if Meursault did not commit a murder. Even the most ferocious judge could not touch a single hair on his head, had he not killed one of his fellow men.

The murder may be a pretext, but it is the only one available, and upon this unfortunate event, the whole structure of meaning erected by Camus comes to rest. It is very important, therefore, to understand how the murder comes to pass. How can a man commit a murder and not be responsible for it? The obvious answer is that this murder must be an *accident* and many critics have taken up that answer. For Louis Hudon, for instance, Meursault is guilty of involuntary manslaughter at worst. How could Meursault premeditate murder since he cannot premeditate a successful career in Paris or marriage with his mistress? Involuntary manslaughter, as everyone knows, should not send a man to the guillotine. This interpretation seems to clinch Camus's case against the "judges."

There is a difficulty, however. If Meursault must commit a crime, we agree that he must be...

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an involuntary rather than a voluntary criminal, but why should he commit a crime in the first place? Accidents will happen, no doubt, but no general conclusion can be drawn from them or they cease, quite obviously, to be accidents. If the murder is an accident, so is the sentence which condemns Meursault, and L’Étranger does not prove that people who do not cry at their mothers’ funerals are likely to be sentenced to death; all the novel proves is that these people will be sentenced to death if they also happen to commit involuntary manslaughter, and this if, it will be conceded, is a very big one. The accident theory reduces Meursault’s case to the proportions of a pathetic but rather insignificant faits-divers.

Let a million devotees of l’absurde copy Meursault’s way of life down to the last drags of his café au lait, let them bury their entire families without shedding a single tear, and not one of them will ever die on the Guillotine for the simple reason that their imitatio absurdi will not and should not include the accidental murder of the Arab; this unfortunate happening, in all probability, will never be duplicated.

The accident theory weakens, if it does not destroy, the tragic opposition between Meursault and society. That is why it does not really account for the experience of the reader. Phenomenologically speaking, once more, the relationship between Meursault and his murder cannot be expressed in terms of motivation, as would be the case with an ordinary criminal, but it is nevertheless felt to be essential, rather than accidental. From the very beginning of the novel we sense that something frightful is going to happen and that Meursault can do nothing to protect himself. The hero is innocent, no doubt, and this very innocence will bring about his downfall.

The critics who, like Carl Viggiani, have best captured the atmosphere of the murder reject all rational interpretations and attribute this event to that same Fatum which presides over the destinies of epic and tragic heroes in ancient and primitive literatures. They point out that the various incidents and objects connected with this episode can be interpreted as symbols of an implacable Nemesis.

We still invoke Fate, today, when we do not want to ascribe an event to chance, even though we cannot account for it. This “explanation” is not meant seriously, however, when we are talking about real happenings taking place in the real world. We feel that this world is essentially rational and that it should be interpreted rationally.

An artist is entitled to disregard rational laws in his search for esthetic effects. No one denies this. If he makes use of this privilege, however, the world which he creates is not only fictional but fantastic. If Meursault is sentenced to death in such a fantastic world, my indignation against the iniquitous judges must be fantastic too, and I cannot say, as Camus did in his preface to the Brée-Lynes edition of L’Étranger, that, in our society, people who behave like Meursault are likely to be sentenced to death. The conclusions which I infer from the novel are valid for this novel only and not for the real world, since the laws of this world have been violated. Meursault’s drama does not give me the right to look with contempt upon real judges operating in a real court. Such contempt must be justified by a perfectly rational sequence of causes or motivations leading from the funeral of the mother to the death of the hero. If, at the most crucial point in this sequence, Fatum is suddenly brandished, or some other deity, as vague as it is dark, we must note this sudden disregard for the rational course of human affairs and take a very close look at the anti-social message of the novel.

If supernatural necessity is present in L’Étranger, why should Meursault alone come under its power? Why should the various characters in the same novel be judged by different yardsticks? If the murderer is not held responsible for his actions, why should the judges be held responsible for theirs? It is possible, of course, to read part of L’Étranger as fantasy and the rest as realistic fiction, but the novel thus fragmented presents no unified world view; even from a purely esthetic point of view it is open to criticism.

The fate theory looks satisfactory as long as the episode of the murder remains detached from the novel, but it cannot be integrated with this novel. Sympathy for Meursault is inseparable from resentment against the judges. We cannot do away with that resentment without mutilating our global esthetic experience. This resentment is present at the phenomenological level and we must somehow account for it even if it is not logically justified.

The search for the significance of Meursault’s murderous gesture leads nowhere. The death of the Arab can be neither an accident nor an event inspired from “above.” And yet it must be one of these two things if it is not voluntary. It is as difficult to ascribe an “ontological status” to the murder as it is easy to ascertain its function in the story. Meursault, we found out, could never have been tried, convicted, and sentenced if he had not killed the Arab. But Camus thought otherwise,
and he said so in the preface to L’Etranger: “A man who does not cry at the funeral of his mother is likely to be sentenced to death.” Is this an a posteriori judgment, deduced from the facts of the story, as everybody has always taken for granted, or is it an a priori principle to which the “facts” must somehow be fitted? Everything becomes intelligible if we choose the second solution. Camus needs his “innocent murder” because his a priori principle is blatantly false. The irritating cult of motherhood and the alleged profundities of l’absurde must not obscure the main issue. Let us translate the brilliant paradoxes of the author back into the terms of his story, let us remove the halo of intellectual sophistication which surrounds the novel and no one will take its message seriously. Do we really believe that the French judicial system is ruthlessly dedicated to the extermination of little bureaucrats addicted to café au lait, Fernandel movies, and casual love affairs with the boss’s secretary?

One of the reasons we do not question the tragic ending of L’Etranger is the lowly status of its hero. Little clerks are, indeed, potential and actual victims of our modern societies. Like the other members of his class, Meursault is vulnerable to a multitude of social ills, ranging from war to racial and economic discrimination. But this fact, on close examination, has no bearing on Camus’s tragedy. The work is not one of social but of individual protest, even though the author welcomes the ambiguity, or, at least, does nothing to dispel it. The main point is that Meursault is the incarnation of unique qualities rather than the member of a group. The judges are supposed to resent what is most Meursault-like in Meursault. Unfortunately, the alleged uniqueness of this hero has no concrete consequences in his behavior. For all practical purposes, Meursault is a little bureaucrat devoid of ambition and, as such, he cannot be singled out for persecution. The only real threats to his welfare are those he shares with every other little bureaucrat, or with the human race as a whole.

The idea of the novel is incredible; that is why a direct demonstration is unthinkible. The writer wanted to arouse an indignation which he himself felt, and he had to take into account the demands of elementary realism. In order to become a martyr, Meursault had to commit some truly reprehensible action but, in order to retain the sympathy of the readers, he had to remain innocent. His crime had to be involuntary, therefore, but not so involuntary that the essential Meursault, the man who does not cry at his mother’s funeral, would remain untouched by the sentence. All the events leading to the actual scene of the shooting, including that scene itself, with its first involuntary shot followed by four voluntary ones, are so devised that they appear to fulfill these two incompatible exigencies. Meursault will die an innocent, and yet his death sentence will be more significant than a mere judicial error.

This solution is really no solution at all. It can only hide, it cannot resolve, the contradiction between the first and the second Meursault, between the peaceful solipsist and the martyr of society; it is that contradiction in a nutshell, as revealed by the two conflicting words, “innocent” and “murder,” whose combination sounds unusual and interesting, somewhat like a surrealistic image, precisely because they cannot form a real concept and be fused together any more than a surrealistic image can evoke a real object.

The skillful narrative technique makes it very difficult to perceive the logical flaw in the structure of the novel. When an existence as uneventful as that of Meursault is described in minute detail, without any humor, an atmosphere of tense expectation is automatically created. As I read the novel, my attention is focused upon details which are insignificant in themselves but which come to be regarded as portents of doom just because the writer has seen fit to record them. I sense that Meursault is moving towards a tragedy, and this impression, which has nothing to do with the hero’s actions, seems to arise from them. Who can see a woman knitting alone in a dark house at the beginning of a mystery story without being led to believe that knitting is a most dangerous occupation?

In the second half of L’Etranger, all the incidents recorded in the first half are recalled and used as evidence against Meursault. The aura of fear which surrounds these incidents appears fully justified. We are aware of these trifles as trifles but we have been conditioned to regard them as potentially dangerous to the hero. It is natural, therefore, to consider the attitude of the judges both unfair and inevitable. In a mystery story, the clues ultimately lead to the murderer; in L’Etranger, they all lead to the judges. The murder itself is handled in the same casual and fateful manner as the other actions of Meursault. Thus, the gap between this portentous action and an afternoon swim in the Mediterranean or the absorption of a cup of café au lait is gradually narrowed, and we are gently led to the incredible conclusion that the hero is sentenced to death not
for the crime of which he is accused and which he
has really committed, but for his innocence, which
this crime has not tarnished and which should
remain obvious to all people at all times, as if it
were the attribute of a divinity.

L’Étranger was not written for pure art’s sake,
nor was it written to vindicate the victims of
persecution everywhere. Camus set out to prove
that the hero according to his heart will neces-
sarily be persecuted by society. He set out to
prove, in other words, that “the judges are al-
ways in the wrong.” The truth deeply buried in
L’Étranger would have been discovered long
before it became explicit in La Chute if we had
read the tragedy of Meursault with truly critical
eyes. A really close reading leads, indeed, to ques-
tioning the structure and, beyond it, the “au-
thenticity” of L’Étranger in terms identical with
those of Clamence’s confession. The allegory of
the generous lawyer stems from the structural
flaw of L’Étranger, fully apprehended for the
first time and interpreted as the “objective cor-
relative” of the author’s “bad faith.” Further
evidence can be provided by the explication of
some obscure passages and apparent contradic-
tions in the text of La Chute.

Here is a first example. At one point in the
description of his past professional life Clamence
reminds: “Je ne me trouvais pas sur la scène du
tribunal mais quelque part, dans les cintres,
come ces dieux que, de temps en temps, on
descend, au moyen d’une machine, pour trans-
figurer l’action et lui donner un sens.” Readers
acquainted with the terminology of post-war
French criticism will remember that Sartre and
his school accuse novelists of mistaking them-
se for “gods” when they warp the destiny of
a character and when, consciously or not, they
lead him to some pre-ordained conclusion. If we
recognize the figure of the writer behind the
mask of the lawyer we shall immediately per-
ceive, in this bizarre statement, an allusion, and
a very pertinent one, to the wrong kind of
novelist. Can this same statement be made mean-
ingful if La Chute is not understood as an allegory
of the writer’s own literary past?

The image of the god is originally Sartrian,
but the Greek element brings us back to those
critics who have rejected all rational interpreta-
tion of the murder. They themselves are solely
concerned with problems of esthetic symbolism,
but their writings may well have helped Camus
realize what he now implicitly denounces as the
“bad faith” of his own creation. The murder of
the Arab, in a novel otherwise rational and re-
alistic, is a deus ex machina, or rather a crimen
ex machina which provides the author not with
a happy ending but with a tragic one which is
really precluded by the character he himself has
given to his hero.

Here is a second example. Clamence tells us
that he chose his clients “à la seule condition
qu’ils fussent de bons meurtriers comme d’autres
de bons sauvages.” This sentence is absolutely
unintelligible in a non-literary context. It is a
thinly-disguised reference to Meursault who
plays, in his fictional world, a role similar to that
of the good savage, a well-known pre-romantic
stranger, in the world of eighteenth-century
literature. Here again, the image may have been
suggested by Sartre, who, in his Situations article,
defined L’Étranger as a twentieth-century conte
philosophique.

Like the “bon sauvage,” Meursault is sup-
pposed to act as a catalyst; his sole presence re-
veals the arbitrariness of the values which bind
the “insiders” together. The bonté of this ab-
stract figure is an absolute which no amount of
sauvagerie can diminish. Meursault’s excellence
has the same quality. He is no less innocent and
the judges no less guilty for punishing him, a
confessed criminal, than if no crime had been
committed. Innocence and guilt are fixed essences;
they cannot be affected by the vicissitudes of
existence any more than Ormazd and Ahriman
can exchange their roles, as the principle of good
and the principle of evil.

In La Chute, the author questions his own mo-
tives for writing fiction within the framework of
this fiction itself. Meursault, as a “client” of
Clamence, has retreated in the background and
become anonymous, but he still is a dramatis
persona, and the structural incoherence of
L’Étranger must be expressed primarily in terms
of his personal motivations. In order to denounced
what he now regards as his own moral illusions
and creative weakness, Clamence must say, as
he does, that his clients were not so innocent after
all. Their allegedly spontaneous and unmotivated
misdeeds were, in fact, premeditated. If Camus
is to abide by the rules of the fictional game
initiated in the first novel, he must attribute to
the hero the “bad faith” which really belongs to
his creator, and this is precisely what he does.
The “good criminals” killed, not for any of the
ordinary reasons, as we are well aware, but be-
cause they wanted to be tried and sentenced. Clamence tells us that their motives were really
the same as his: like so many of our contempo-
raries, in this anonymous world, they wanted a
little publicity.

Meursault, however, is a character of fiction;
responsibility for his crime lies, in the last resort, with the creator himself. The present reading would be more convincing if Clamence, instead of placing the blame upon his "clients," had placed it squarely upon himself. But Clamence is already the lawyer; how could he be the instigator of the crime without absurdity? Such transparent allegory would deal the last blow to La Chute as art for art's sake and the present exegesis would be pointless. Let us apologize, therefore, for belaboring the obvious since Clamence does, indeed, present himself both as the passionate defender and as the accomplice of his good criminals. He does not hesitate to assume these two incompatible roles. If we reject the obvious implications of this inconsistency, we must dare condemn La Chute as an incoherent piece of fiction.

This is a curious lawyer, indeed, who manipulates the court from high above, as he would a puppet show, and who discovers the guilt of his clients after they are sentenced, even though he himself had a hand in their crimes. We must observe, on the other hand, that this collusion with the criminals should destroy the image of the generous lawyer as a stuffy, self-righteous, upper middle-class man if the reader did not realize, subconsciously at least, that these criminals are only paper ones. The account of Clamence's law career is really a collection of metaphors, all pointing to "unauthentic creation," and Camus uses them as he sees fit, tearing as he goes the thin veil of his fiction. Clamence really suggests that the author of L'Etranger was not really conscious of his own motivation until he experienced his own "chute." His purpose, which disguised itself as "generosity," was really identical with egotistical passion. L'Etranger must not be read as a roman à thèse. The author did not consciously try to deceive his audience, but he succeeded all the better because he managed to deceive himself in the first place. The dichotomy between Meursault and his judges represents the dichotomy between the Self and the Others in a world of intersubjective warfare.

L'Etranger, as the expression of egotistical values and meanings, forms a structure, a relatively stable "world view." Camus "sincerely" believed in his and, consequently, in Meursault's innocence, because he passionately believed in the guilt of the "judges." The incoherence of the plot does not stem from an awkward effort to prove something which was only half believed or not believed at all. On the contrary; the author's conviction that the iniquity of the judges can always be proved was so strong that nothing could shake it. The innocent will inevitably be treated as a criminal. In the process of proving this point, Camus had to turn his innocent into a real criminal, but his faith was such that he did not perceive the tautology. We can understand, now, why the "generous lawyer" is presented to us both as the sincere defender of his clients and as the accomplice of their crimes.

As long as the egotistical Manicheism which produced L'Etranger held its sway over him, the author could not perceive the structural flaw of his novel. All illusions are one. They stand together and they fall together as soon as their cause, egotistical passion, is perceived. The confession of Clamence does not lead to a new "interpretation" of L'Etranger but to an act of transcendence; the perspective of this first novel is dépassée.

The rejection of the world view expressed in L'Etranger is not the fruit of an empirical discovery but of an existential conversion, and it is, indeed, such a conversion which is described ironically but unmistakably, throughout the novel, in terms of an ego-shattering "chute." This spiritual metamorphosis is triggered, so to speak, by the incident of the drowning woman but, basically, it has nothing to do with exterior circumstances. Neither can our own re-evaluation of L'Etranger in the light of La Chute rest on external evidence such as scholarly arguments and "explications de textes," however massive the material proof available through these channels. The evidence will not be judged convincing until there is a willingness to go along with the self-critical mood of the creator. I, the reader, must undergo an experience, less profound to be sure, but somewhat analogous to that of this creator. The true critic must not remain superbly and coldly objective; he is the one most profoundly affected and transformed by the work of art; he truly sympathizes, suffers with the author. I, too, must fall from my pedestal; as an admirer of L'Etranger, I must accept the risk of an exegetical chute.

A refusal to probe the confession of Clamence must not be rationalized on the grounds that it makes the literary reputation of Camus more secure. It is the reverse which is true. The fact that La Chute transcends the perspective of L'Etranger does not mean that, in a comparison with other works of recent fiction, the earlier work ranks lower than had been previously thought; it certainly means, however, that La Chute ranks higher.

A gingerly approach to La Chute obscures the true greatness of Camus. This work can already
Camus's Stranger Retried

be defined as a forgotten masterpiece. Camus is praised to the high heavens by some, while others deride his role as "directeur de conscience" of the middle class, but all this is done with only passing reference, or no reference at all, to La Chute. Most people ignore the fact that Albert Camus was the first one to react against his own cult. Here and there, some voices are raised in defense of a truth which no one, it seems, is really eager to hear. Philippe Sénart, for instance, maintained in La Table ronde (July 1962) that Camus refused to be the infallible pope of his own new neo-humanism:

Il ne voulait être que le pape des fous et il écrivait La Chute pour se tourner en dérision et il s'accusait passant reference, or no reference at all, to La Chute. Most people ignore the fact that Albert Camus was the first one to react against his own cult. Here and there, some voices are raised in defense of a truth which no one, it seems, is really eager to hear. Philippe Sénart, for instance, maintained in La Table ronde (July 1962) that Camus refused to be the infallible pope of his own new neo-humanism:

In one of the speeches pronounced when he received his Nobel Prize, Camus opened still a new line of investigation to the critics of his work:

Le thème du poète maudit né dans une société marchande (Chatterton en est la plus belle illustration), s'est durci dans un préjugé qui finit par vouloir qu'on ne puisse être un grand artiste que contre la société de son temps, quelle qu'elle soit. Légitime à son origine quand il affirmait qu'un artiste véritable ne pouvait composer avec le monde de l'argent, le principe est devenu faux lorsqu'on en a tiré qu'un artiste ne pouvait s'affirmer qu'en étant contre toute chose en général. (Discours de Suède)

Throughout the Discours de Suède, Camus dissociated himself from his own past as much as the occasion permitted. Here, he relates the type of literature he himself had practiced for so long not to an awe-inspiring philosophical tradition, as in L'Homme révolté, but to French romanticism. He chooses as the archetype of "révolte" Chatterton, the one work of Alfred de Vigny with which contemporary readers are likely to find most fault. He suggests that the tragic conflicts set forth in his own early works are really a degraded form of Vigny's romantic drama.

An earlier Camus would certainly have rejected this rapprochement out of hand in spite or rather because of its extreme relevance. L'Étranger is really much closer to Chatterton than to the conte philosophique because the conte has a concrete content and it fights for definite objectives whereas Chatterton like L'Étranger is primarily an abstract protest of the discontented ego. A work which is against everything in general is really against nothing in particular and no one actually feels disturbed by it. Like Dostoevsky's underground man, Meursault says: "I am alone and they are together." The work spells the final democratization of the romantic myth, the universal symbol of the separated ego in a world where almost everyone feels like an "outsider."

Chatterton, like Meursault, was conceived as a lonely figure, as a man who refuses "to play the game." Both men live in a world of their own which contrasts with the unauthentic world of other men. Both of them suffer and die because society makes it impossible for them to live according to their own lonely, infinitely superior ways.

There is a difference, however. When Chatterton is offered the same type of third-rate job Meursault holds, he refuses haughtily. In his eyes, this menial way of life is incompatible with his mission. We find it rather easy to interpret Chatterton's destiny in terms of romantic pride. Camus's hero appears very humble by contrast; he does not view himself as a man with a mission; he has no visible pretentions and he is ready to do whatever is necessary to sustain his mediocre existence.

This modest appearance really hides a more extreme form of romantic pride. Between Chatterton and other men there is still a measure of reciprocity, whereas none is left in the case of Meursault. Chatterton gives his "genius" and the community must give him food and shelter in return. If society does not fulfill its share of the contract, the poet cannot fulfill his role as a great poet; the crowd grows spiritually hungry and the poet grows physically hungry. This general starvation is less tragic, no doubt, than Greek or classical tragedy and it is so because Chatterton is less deeply involved with his fellowmen than earlier tragic heroes. Real tragedy demands genuine involvement. It is somewhat ironic, let us note in passing, that a doctrine with such ethereal pretensions as 1830 romanticism could produce only alimentary tragedies of the Chatterton type. But this last meager resource is still truly present, whereas it is gone in the case of Camus. The poetic life cherished by Chatterton has become a part of the shameful game which the real individual must refuse to play in order to remain "authentic." L'Étranger should not end in a Chatterton-like tragedy; it should revolve around the closed circle of a perfectly self-sufficient personality. An endless succession of cafés au lait,
Fernandel movies, and amorous interludes should provide a scale model of the Nietzschean eternal return.

Romantic pride separates Chatterton from his fellowmen; greater pride cuts Meursault off so completely that no tragic possibilities remain. In order to grasp this point, we may compare Meursault with another romantic in disguise, Monsieur Teste, the solipsistic hero of Valéry's youth. Monsieur Teste is infinitely brilliant and original but he alone is aware of his own worth. He is satisfied, like Meursault, with a third-rate job; he does not mind looking quelconque and remaining unknown. He will never be a grand homme because he refuses to sacrifice anything to the spirit of the crowd. Meursault is really a Teste without a Ph.D., a Teste who prefers café au lait to higher mathematics, a super-Teste, in other words, who does not even bother to be intelligent.

The idea of turning Teste into a martyr of society would have sounded ludicrous to Valéry. The only thing a solipsist is entitled to ask of society is indifference, and indifference he will get if he behaves like a Teste or a Meursault. Valéry was perfectly aware that, as individualism becomes more extreme, the possibilities offered to a writer shrink; and he rejected as "impure" all types of dramatic literature.

L'Étranger begins like Monsieur Teste and it ends like Chatterton. Unlike Valéry, Camus does not perceive or he refuses to assume the consequences of his literary solipsism. He resorts to the device of the "innocent murder" in order to retrieve the structure of the "poète maudit" or, more generally, of the "exceptional man persecuted by society." The crime ex machina saves the author from the limitations of his own attitude.

Contemporary readers sense that there is something contrived in Chatterton, and yet Vigny did not have to turn his exceptional man into a murderer in order to present him as a martyr of society. L'Étranger should appear even more contrived, but we do not understand the disturbing role which violence plays in it, probably because the novel is the latest successful formulation of the myth of the romantic self.

Chatterton already prefers to be persecuted rather than ignored, but we cannot prove the point because it is plausible that society will prevent a poet from fulfilling his destiny as a poet. In the case of Meursault, this same preference for egotistical martyrdom can be proven, because it is not plausible that society will prevent a little bureaucrat from fulfilling his destiny as a little bureaucrat. Camus takes his hero out of society with one hand only to put him back with the other. He wants Meursault to be a solipsist, then turns him into the hero of a trial, that quintessence of diseased human relations in our modern society.

Why does Camus crave solitude and society at the same time; why is he both repelled and fascinated by les autres? The contradiction is really inherent in the romantic personality. The romantic does not want to be alone, but to be seen alone. In Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky shows that solitary dreams and the "trial" are the two inseparable facets, the dialectically-related "moments" of the romantic consciousness. But this proud consciousness refuses to acknowledge openly the fascination it feels for the others. In the days of Vigny a discreet return to society was still possible because a few bridges were left between the individualist and his fellowmen. The "mission of the poet" was one, romantic love another. Camus has destroyed these last bridges because the urge to be alone is stronger in him than ever before. But the unacknowledged urge to return to other men is also stronger than ever. And this second urge can no longer be satisfied within the context created by the first.

The murder is really a secret effort to re-establish contact with humanity. It reveals an ambivalence which is present in all art with solipsistic tendencies but which has probably never been so visibly written into the structure of a work. This contradiction is also present in Monsieur Teste because it can never be eliminated completely. Monsieur Teste lives and dies alone, but not so much alone that we, the readers, are left in the dark about his superhuman and invisible qualities. The egotistical Deus is never absconditus that it does not have its priests and mediators. The ambiguous narrator plays the part of the "innocent murder" in L'Étranger. He is an artificial bridge between the solipsist and ordinary mortals. He is close enough to Teste to understand him and close enough to us to write for us. Such a man, by definition, should not exist and the work should never have been written. Valéry was so aware of it that he remained silent for twenty years after writing Monsieur Teste.

Camus, too, should be silent and he is at least partly aware of it since, in Sisyphe, he discusses literature and concludes that it is a fitting pastime for the knight-errant of l'absurde—provided, of course, it is not oriented to les autres. This a
**posteriori** justification must be read primarily as evidence that the problem was a significant and important one for Camus at the time. The pure doctrine of solipsism is not in *Sisyphe* but in *L'Etranger*. Meursault does not read or write; we cannot imagine him submitting a manuscript to a publisher or correcting galley proofs. All such activities have no place in an "authentic" existence.

Both the young Valéry and the young Camus cherished literature; both knew that it offered an avenue of escape from their equally mediocre station in life. And yet both of them held views which made the practice of their art almost impossible. Romantic individualism becomes so exacerbated with these writers that it verges on a certain type of neurotic behavior.

We all know, outside of literature, that certain people are too proud to acknowledge a situation as painful. These people may even do their utmost to perpetuate or even aggravate this situation in order to prove to themselves that it is *freely chosen*. The creation of Meursault certainly reflects an attitude of this type. The life of this hero is objectively sad and sordid. The man is, indeed, a derelict; he has no intellectual life, no love, no friendship, no interest in anyone or faith in anything. His life is limited to physical sensations and to cheap pleasures of modern mass culture. The uninformed readers—American undergraduates, for instance—often perceive this essential wretchedness; they grasp the *objective* significance of the novel because the *subjective* intention of the creator escapes them. The "informed" reader, on the other hand, rejects the objective significance as naïve because he readily perceives the subjective intention, and he feels very sophisticated—until he reads and understands *La Chute*. Clamence alone is aware that there are two layers of significance, subjective and objective, and he picks the latter as the essential one when he states that his "good criminals" were wretched people *at bottom*. The most lucid view justifies the most naïve; the truth belongs to the reader who takes nothing or *everything* into account, and to no one in between.

The undergraduates quickly learn, of course, that it is not smart to pity Meursault, but they vaguely wonder, for a while, why his living hell should be interpreted as paradise. This hell is the one to which, rightly or wrongly, Camus felt condemned in the years of *L'Etranger*. There are psychological, social, and even metaphysical reasons, as well as literary ones, for *L'Etranger*'s mood of repressed despair. These were troubled times; opportunity was scarce; the health of the young Camus was not good; he was not yet a famous writer and he had no assurance that he would ever become one. He *willed*, therefore, as many did who came before and after him, the solitude and mediocrity from which he did not see any escape. His was an act of intellectual pride and desperation reminiscent of Nietzschean *amor fati*. Valéry's *Monsieur Teste* stems from a comparable experience in a world somewhat less harsh. A young man who feels doomed to anonymity and mediocrity is compelled to repay with indifference the indifference of society. If he is very gifted, he may devise a new and radical variety of romantic solipsism; he may create a *Teste* or a Meursault.

Even more relevant here than a purely psychiatric interpretation are the passages of *The Sickness unto Death* dedicated to what Kierkegaard calls "defiance," or "the despair of willing despairingly to be oneself."

... this too is a form of despair: not to be willing to hope that an earthly distress, a temporal cross, might be removed. This is what the despair which wills desperately to be itself is not willing to hope. It has convinced itself that this thorn in the flesh gnaws so profoundly that he cannot abstract it—no matter whether this is actually so or his passion makes it true for him—and so he is willing to accept it as it were eternally. So he is offended by it, or rather from it he takes occasion to be offended at the whole of existence. ... To hope in the possibility of help, not to speak of help by virtue of the absurd, that for God all things are possible—no, that he will not do. And as for seeking help from any other—no, that he will not do for all the world; rather than seek help he would prefer to be himself—with all the torture of hell, if so must be. ... Now it is too late, he once would have given everything to be rid of this torment but was made to wait, now that's all past, now he would rather rage against everything, he, the one man in the whole of existence who is the most unjustly treated, to whom it is especially important to have his torment at hand, important that no one should take it from him—for thus he can convince himself that he is in the right. (*Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*, New York, 1954, pp. 204–205)

The absurd of which Kierkegaard is speaking, needless to say, is not Camus's *absurde*. It is rather the opposite of it, since it is the final rejection of nihilism, rejected by Camus himself and dismissed as facile optimism in *Sisyphe*. The young Camus thought he could dispose of Kierkegaard in a few sentences but Kierkegaard on Camus goes much deeper, paradoxically, than Camus on Kierkegaard: "such self-control, such firmness, such ataraxia, etc., border almost on the fabulous.... The self wants... to have the
honor of this poetical, this masterly plan according to which it has understood itself. And yet . . . just at the instant when it seems to be nearest to having the fabric finished it can arbitrarily resolve the whole thing into nothing” (p. 203).

This highest form of despair, Kierkegaard informs us, is encountered solely in the works of a few great poets and we perceive the bond between the Vigny of Chatterton, the Valéry of Teste, and the Camus of L’Étranger when the philosopher adds: “one might call it Stoicism—yet without thinking only of this philosophic sect.” The genius of Kierkegaard cuts through the maze of minor differences which help a writer assert his own individuality, thus obscuring the fundamental significance of his literary posture. The whole spiritual structure is grasped through a single act of intuition. The essential features are revealed, common, as a rule, to two or more writers. The following passage enables us, for instance, to account for the similarities between Teste and Meursault:

One might represent the lower forms of despair by describing or by saying something about the outward traits of the despairer. But the more despair becomes spiritual, and the more is the self alert with demoniac shrewdness to keep despair shut up in close reserve, and all the more intent therefore to set the outward appearance at the level of indifference, to make it as unrevealing and indifferent as possible. . . . This hiddenness is precisely something spiritual and is one of the safety devices for assuring oneself of having as it were behind reality an enclosure, a world for itself locking all else out, a world where the despairing self is employed as tirelessly as Tantalus in willing to be itself. (pp. 206–207)

This last reference might as well be to Sisyphe rather than to Tantalus. Camus’s Sisyph, like Teste, is a “rationalization” of Kierkegaardian despair, whereas L’Étranger is the esthetic, or naïve and, as such, most revealing expression of that same despair.

Here again, we must not let the hollow specter of the “biographical fallacy” interfere with our comprehension of an author’s fundamental problems. We do not confuse the creator with his work. The relationship is not a simple one. Meursault is the portrait, or even the caricature, of a man Camus never was but swore to be, at the end of his adolescence, because he feared he could never be anyone else. The scene with the employer is revelatory. Meursault, as we all know, is offered a trip to Paris and the possibility of a permanent job there. He is not interested. The incident has only one purpose, which is to demonstrate Meursault’s total lack of ambition. And it does what it is supposed to do; it does it, in a sense, too well; it is just a little too pointed. Why should any little clerk with a penchant for sun bathing want to move to Paris, with its dreary winter climate? At the lower echelon, which is Meursault’s, sunny Algeria offers the same possibilities for advancement as the French capital. As Meursault refuses, with studied indifference, to live in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, we can hear Camus himself protesting that he has no literary ambitions.

Camus left Algeria for Paris; he wrote and published quite a few books; he submitted, at least for a few years, to the various indignities which the fabrication of a grand homme demands. The conclusion is inescapable: Camus, unlike his hero, was not devoid of ambition, especially literary ambition. This truth is as obvious as it is innocuous, but it sounds almost blasphemous; we are still living in the atmosphere of puritanical egotism which fosters such works as L’Étranger and which prevents us from reading them critically.

The urge to escape solitude was stronger than the self-destructive dynamism of repressed pride. But this urge had to prevail in an underhanded fashion. Camus could not contradict himself too openly. The style of the novel reveals how he managed to deceive himself. Rhetorical ornaments are systematically avoided; the author uses none of the gestures which serve to emphasize a good point. We feel that he is not looking at us and that he hardly unclenches his teeth. He rejects even the affectation of vulgarity and profligacy which the preceding generation had adopted in an earlier attempt to destroy rhetoric—with the sole result, of course, of creating a new one. The famous rejection of the preterite—or of the present—the two tenses of formal narration, for the passé composé which is a conversational tense, amounts to an abandonment of all approved techniques of story telling. The author refuses to be a “raconteur” who performs for an audience. His écriture blanche gives an effect of greyish monotony which is the next best thing to silence, and silence is the only conduct truly befitting a solipsist, the only one, however, which he cannot bring himself to adopt.

This style bears a striking resemblance to the style of Meursault’s actions prior to the murder. We feel that someone, on some fine day, handed Camus a pen and a piece of paper, and Camus did the natural and mechanical thing to do, in such circumstances, which is to start writing, just as Meursault did the natural and mechanical thing to do, when you receive a gun, which is to start
higher standpoint of La Chute, he realizes that his
portunist writing cheap best-sellers. From the motives, as a writer, were those of a literary op-
qu'ils payassent le moins possible; ce qu'ils payaient, courageait aussi a deployer de meritoires efforts pour ma place.
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trop cher. Defendre nos malheureux aspirants a la
stands in the same relation to its own conse-
bears the imprint of a single creative act which 
tance, the book, as Meursault's behavior to his murderer. The "innocent murder" is really the image and the crux of the whole creative process. Clamence is aware of that fact when he insists that he, as a lawyer, had the same hidden motives as his clients. He, too, craved publicity but he did not have to pay as dearly as the actual criminals for the satisfaction of that impure desire. He should have shared in the punishment as he had shared in the crime, but he was acclaimed, instead, as a great moral leader:

Le crime tient sans trêve le devant de la scène, mais le criminel n'y figure que fugitivevement pour être aussitôt remplacé. Ces brefs triomphes enfin se paient trop cher. Défendre nos malheureux aspirants à la réputation revenait, au contraire, à être vraiment reconnu, dans le même temps et aux mêmes places, mais par des moyens plus économiques. Cela m'encourageait aussi à déployer de méritoires efforts pour qu'ils payassent le moins possible; ce qu'ils payaient, ils le payaient un peu à ma place.

Camus does not want us to believe that his motives, as a writer, were those of a literary opportunist writing cheap best-sellers. From the higher standpoint of La Chute, he realizes that his own involvement in the tragic conflicts represented in his work was rooted in his own ambitions and in that stubborn need for self-justification to which we all succumb. L'Étranger is a real work of art since it can be apprehended as a single structure; its stylistic features are reflected in its plot and vice versa. We must not speak of the novel's unity, however, but of its consistent duality and of its radical ambiguity. How could the novel be one when its creative process is truly "divided against itself"? Every page of the work reflects the contradiction and the division inherent in the murder; every denial of communication is really an effort to communicate; every gesture of indifference or hostility is an appeal in disguise. The critical perspective suggested by La Chute illuminates even those structural elements which the esthetic approach makes its essential concern but which it ultimately leaves out of account because it isolates them from the content of the work and its many-sided significance.

Can we really understand the murder of the Arab, the structure of the novel, its style, and the "inspiration" of the novelist as a single process? We can if we compare this process to certain types of immature behavior. Let us imagine a child who, having been denied something he wanted very much, turns away from his parents; no blandishments will make him come out of his retreat. Like Meursault, like the first Camus, this child manages to convince himself that his sole desire is to be left alone.

If the child is left alone, his solitude quickly becomes unbearable but pride prevents him from returning meekly to the family circle. What can he do, then, to reestablish contact with the outside world? He must commit an action which will force the attention of the adults but which will not be interpreted as abject surrender, a punishable action, of course. But an overt challenge would still be too transparent; the punishable action must be committed covertly and deviously. The child must affect toward the instruments of his future misdeed the same casual attitude as Meursault towards his crime or as Camus towards literature.

Look at Meursault: he starts mingling with underworld characters inadvertently and casually, just as he would associate with anyone else; the matter is of no real consequence since other people do not really exist for him. Meursault, gradually, becomes involved in the shady dealings of his associates but he is hardly aware of this involvement. Why should he care since one action is as good as another? The child's be-
behavior is exactly the same; he picks up, for instance, a box of matches; he plays with it for a while, absent-mindedly; he does not mean any harm, of course, but all of a sudden, a match is afame, and the curtains too if they happen to be near-by. Is it an accident, or is it fate? It is "bad faith" and the child feels, like Meursault, that he is not responsible. Objects, to him, are mere fragments of substance lost in a chaotic universe. The absurde, in the sense popularized by Sisyphe, has become incarnate in this child.

L'Etranger was written and is usually read from the warped perspective which has just been defined. The secretely provocative nature of the murder is never acknowledged, and the reprisals of society are presented as unprovoked aggression. The relationship between the individual and society is thereby turned upside down; a lonely individual, Meursault, is presented to us as completely indifferent to the collectivity, whereas the collectivity is supposed to be intensely concerned with his daily routine. This picture is false, and we all know it. Indifference really belongs to the collectivity; intense concern should be the lot of the lonely and miserable hero. The real picture is found in the few truly great works of fiction of Cervantes, Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, and, we might add, the Camus of La Chute.

The truth denied in L'Etranger is really so overwhelming that it comes out almost openly at the end of the novel, in Meursault's passionate outburst of resentment. Many readers have rightly felt that this conclusion rings more true than the rest of the novel. The resentment was there all along but pride silenced it, at least until the death sentence, which gave Meursault a pretext to express his despair without losing face in his own eyes. The child, too, wants to be punished, in order to express his grief without confessing its real cause, even to himself. In the last sentence, Meursault practically acknowledges that the sole and only guillotine threatening him is the indifference of les autres. "Pour que tout soit consommé, pour que je me sente moins seul, il me restait à souhaiter qu'il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu'ils m'accueillent avec des cris de haine."

The structural flaw in L'Etranger becomes intelligible when the novel is assimilated to a type of behavior which has become very common, even among adults, in our contemporary world. Meursault's empty life, his sullen mood, his upside-down world, no less than his half-hearted and secretly provocative crime are typical of what we call "juvenile delinquency." This social aspect can easily be reconciled with the ultra-romantic conception of the self which underlies the novel. Observers have pointed out the element of lateday romanticism in juvenile delinquency. In recent years, some novels and films dealing openly with this social phenomenon have borrowed features from L'Etranger, a work which, outwardly at least, has nothing to do with it. The hero of the film A bout de souffle, for instance, half voluntarily kills a policeman, thus becoming a "good criminal" after Meursault's fashion. The theme of juvenile delinquency is absent from L'Etranger because the novel is the literary equivalent of the action, its perfect analogon.

L'Etranger is certainly no accurate portrayal of the society in which it was created. Should we say, therefore, as the formalists do, that it is a "world of its own," that it is wholly independent from this society? The novel reverses the laws of our society but this reversal is not an absence of relationship. It is a more complex relationship which involves negative as well as positive factors and which cannot be expressed in the mechanical terms of the old realism or positivism. It is a dialectical relationship which must be apprehended if we want to apprehend the esthetic structure itself. We have just seen that the only way to illuminate the esthetic structure of L'Etranger as an integrated structure is to resort to the social phenomenon called "juvenile delinquency." L'Etranger is not independent from the social reality it overturns, since this overturning is a social attitude among others and a very typical one. The autonomy of the structure may appear absolute to the writer at the time of his writing, and to the uncritical reader, but it is only relative. L'Etranger reflects the world view of the juvenile delinquent with unmatched perfection precisely because it is not aware of reflecting anything, except, of course, the innocence of its hero and the injustice of his judges.

Camus wrote L'Etranger against the "judges" or, in other words, against the middle class who are his sole potential readers. Instead of rejecting the book as the author had half hoped, half feared, these bourgeois readers showered it with praise. The "judges," obviously, did not recognize their portrait when they saw it. They, too, cursed the iniquitous judges and howled for clemency. They, too, identified with the innocent victim and they acclaimed Meursault as a Galahad of sun-worshipping "authenticity." The public turned out, in short, to be made not of judges, as the author had mistakenly believed, but of generous lawyers like the author himself.

Since all the admirers of the early Camus share,
to some extent, in the guilt of the "generous lawyer," they, too, should be present in La Chute. And they are, in the person of Clamence's silent listener. The man has nothing to say because Clamence answers his questions and objections almost before they are formulated in our minds. At the end of the book, this man confesses his identity; he, too, is a generous lawyer.

Thus, Clamence is addressing each one of us personally, leaning toward me across a narrow café table and looking straight in my eyes. His monologue is dotted with exclamations, interjections, and apostrophes; every three lines we have an "allons," "tiens," "quoi!" "eh bien!" "ne trouvez-vous pas," "mon cher compatriote," etc. The style of La Chute is the exact antithesis of the impersonal and antirhetorical écriture blanche. Gone is the false detachment of Meursault. We have shifted from the "restrained indignation" of the generous lawyer, as Clamence aptly defines it, to the open theatricality of a self-confessed and yet insurmountable bad faith. The studiously cheap and cacophonous symbolism of La Chute is a parody of the serious symbolic works of the past.

As he questions the authenticity of L'Etranger and similar works, Camus questions the question itself. La Chute, no less than L'Etranger, is directed against all potential readers since it is directed against the lawyers in a world where only lawyers are left. The technique of spiritual aggression has become more subtle but its aim has not changed.

Why does Clamence point out to us that his new posture is still one of bad faith? He undermines his own position in order to prevent others from undermining it. After deriding the generous lawyer, he mockingly describes himself as a penitent-judge. Slyly anticipating his readers whom he knows to be adept at gleaning moral comfort from the most sinister parables, he gives a new twist to the now familiar serpent, hoping to keep one step ahead of everybody else in a game of self-justification which has turned into a game of self-accusation.

Let the judge repudiate judgment and he becomes a judge in disguise, a lawyer; let the lawyer repudiate the disguise and he becomes a penitent-judge; let the penitent-judge . . . We are spiraling down the circles of a particularly nasty hell, but this more and more precipitous "chute" is perhaps not so fatal as it seems. The penitent-judge does not believe in his role half as much as the generous lawyer did. The conclusion of La Chute is a final pirouette, as well, perhaps, as the image of what may happen to a world entirely given over to the lawyers and the penitent-judges.

The universal need for self-justification haunts all modern trial literature. But there are different levels of awareness. The so-called "myth" of the trial can be approached from several mutually exclusive perspectives. In L'Etranger, the real question is that of the innocence and guilt of the protagonists. The criminal is innocent and the judges are guilty. In the more conventional egonourishing fiction, the criminal is usually guilty and the judges innocent. But this difference is really secondary. In both cases, "good" and "bad" are rigid concepts; the verdict of the judges is challenged but not their vision.

La Chute goes higher and deeper. Clamence is still busy proving that he is "good" and that other people are "bad," but his systems of classification keep breaking down. 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?" It is a more interesting question, the very question of Dostoevsky. In La Chute, Camus lifts trial literature back to the level of this great predecessor.

The first Camus did not realize how far-reaching, how pervasive the evil of judgment is. He felt that he was outside judgment because he condemned those who condemn. Using Gabriel Marcel's terminology, we may say that Meursault viewed evil as something outside himself, a problem that concerned the judges alone, whereas Clamence knows that he, himself, is involved. Evil is the mystery of a pride which, as it condemns others, unwittingly condemns itself. It is the pride of Oedipus, another hero of trial literature, always uttering the curses which result in his own undoing. Reciprocity between the I and the Thou asserts itself in the very efforts I make to deny it: "The sentence which you pass against your fellow men," says Clamence, "is always flung back into your face where it effects quite a bit of damage."

The outsider is really inside, but he is not aware of it. This lack of awareness determines the esthetic as well as the spiritual limitations of L'Etranger. A man who feels the urge to write a trial novel is not really "in love with the sun." He does not belong to the sunny Mediterranean but to the fogs of Amsterdam.

The world in which we live is one of perpetual judgment. It must be our Judeo-Christian heritage, still active within us. We are not healers, pagans. We are not Jews, either, since we have no Law. But we are not real Christians since we
keep judging. Who are we? A Christian cannot help feeling that the answer is close at hand: “... thou art inexcusable, o man, whosoever thou art that judgest; for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest dost the same things.” Did Camus realize that all the themes of La Chute are in Paul’s Epistles? If he had, would he have drawn from the analogy, and from the answers of Paul, the conclusions which a Christian would draw? Nobody can answer these questions.

Meursault was guilty of judgment but he never found out; Clamence alone found out. The two heroes may be viewed as a single one whose career describes a single itinerary somewhat analogous to the itinerary of the great Dostoevskian heroes. Like Raskolnikov, like Dmitri Karamazov, Meursault-Clamence first pictured himself as the victim of a judicial error, but he finally realized that the sentence was just, even if the judges were personally unjust, because the Self can provide only a grotesque parody of Justice.

The universal dimension of La Chute can be reached only through its most personal, almost intimate dimension. The two are really one; the structure of the work is one and its significance is one. Openly, at least, this significance is entirely negative. But the positive aspects are summed up in one sentence of the Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Camus opposes, in their order, his two fundamental attitudes, as a creator and as a man, leaving no doubt as to the personal significance of Clamence’s confession:

L’art ... oblige ... l’artiste à ne pas s’isoler; il le soumet à la vérité la plus humble et la plus universelle. Et celui qui, souvent, a choisi son destin d’artiste parce qu’il se sentait différent, apprend bien vite qu’il ne nourrira son art, et sa différence, qu’en avouant sa ressemblance avec tous.

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