

## Albert Camus, Augustine, and the Origins of Modernity

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Camus' principal philosophical and political ambition was a critical examination of the nature and origins of modernity. By the mid-1940s he had begun to organize his books into three "stages" (*étapes*) or "cycles" (*cycles*) that would provide structure for the analysis.<sup>[1]</sup> These cycles were ordered thematically according to a triptych of Greek myths: The Myth of Sisyphus (the absurd), The Myth of Prometheus (rebellion), and The Myth of Nemesis (love) (Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, 257). After the publication of *The Rebel*, the philosophical essay Camus wrote for the second cycle, the project of the cyclical works ground to a halt. The analysis failed to generate the results Camus had anticipated primarily because the methodological assumptions of the project were unworkable. Initially Camus believed it was possible to undertake a critical analysis of modernity by accepting modernity's own premises as his "point of departure" (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 10; Camus, *The Rebel*, 4). The method failed primarily because Camus tended to conflate modern experiences with modern *interpretations* of those experiences, which forced him to exclude from the analysis a wide range of experience as a matter of principle. The results of the practice were predictable. Though Camus spent the better part of twenty years attempting to develop his critique of modernity within this framework, his methodology constantly undermined his best insights and left his readers with a number of conflicting impressions: that he was a modern with traditionalist leanings, that he was a traditionalist with modern leanings, that he was a proto-Christian struggling with modern problems, or simply that he was a novelist who could not compose a logically sound argument.

By the early 1950s Camus realized that the methodology had made the project of the cyclical books unworkable and had diverted him from their central task. Though he had finished the first two cycles, the critique of modernity still remained to be completed and the nagging question of its relationship to Christianity had been left entirely unsettled. Indeed in the absence of a full, mature examination of these problems the early argument of *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism* continued to insinuate itself into the analysis almost by default (Camus, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, 133).<sup>[2]</sup> After the failure of *The Rebel* and seeing no way forward, Camus fell silent. He did not write another cyclical book for nine years and he did not write a book of any kind for the next five.

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In 1947 Camus wrote: “If, to outgrow nihilism, one must return to Christianity, one may well follow the impulse and outgrow Christianity in Hellenism.” A few years later he stated the matter even more forcefully and gave the project its content and aim: “Go back to the passage from Hellenism to Christianity, the true and only turning point in history” (*Notebooks 1942-1951*, 183, 267). After a hiatus of five years, Camus broke with the project (though not the form) of the cyclical books and returned to the central ambition of his critique of modernity. The fruit of that return is *The Fall*, a work of fiction in which Camus offers an interpretation of modernity unfettered by the methodological restrictions of his previous analyses of the absurd and rebellion.

According to the book’s epigraph, *The Fall* is a “portrait, but not of an individual; it is the aggregate of the vices of our whole generation in their fullest expression” (Camus, *The Fall*). How does such a portrait also entail a historical return to the “passage from Hellenism to Christianity”? To answer to this question we need to consider *The Fall*’s most important source text – Augustine’s *Confessions*. For Camus, Augustine “stood at the crossroads” of Christianity and Hellenism (Albert Camus, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, 117). We know which tradition Augustine chose. Camus described his work as a “second revelation” of the Christian faith, one persuasive enough to enable a small religious sect to precipitate a definitive break with the teachings of the ancients and to prepare the ground for the advent our own modern world (*Christian metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, 115). This paper examines Camus’s assessment of Augustine’s achievement.

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Camus uses the *Confessions* both thematically and textually to construct the narrative of *The Fall*. The primary thematic content he employs is the conflict between *amor Dei* and *amor sui* that frames Augustine’s confession. Like Augustine, Clamence struggles with self-love and attempts to describe the manner in which it undermines his love of God. He accepts Augustine’s assumption that the world is an order of love, though his tendency is to equate love with self-love in order to escape his own duplicity. Augustine and Clamence are both highly erotic human beings who employ confession as a means of coming to terms with their self-love. And they are compelled to confess similar things: erotic excesses and improprieties, a lust for experience that tends toward a neglect of the other, and a disturbing tendency to ascend to the highest things only quickly to turn their backs on what they have learned or to use it for questionable purposes.<sup>[3]</sup>

In addition to these thematic similarities between *The Fall* and the *Confessions* there are several important textual ones that Camus uses to establish the comparison, illuminate the meaning of Clamence’s

confession, and assess the significance of Augustine's achievement. The only surprising thing about these parallels is the fact that they have gone unnoticed for so long. Even someone with only a passing acquaintance with both texts would be able to spot them immediately. Yet during almost sixty years of Camus scholarship there has been complete silence about their interpretive importance.

In order to establish the parallels between the two accounts, Camus has Clamence spend much of the first part of his confession describing his erotic relationships with women and the manner in which they serve and reflect his self-love. This repeats an orientation that Augustine identifies in himself early in the *Confessions* and which troubles him through much of his adult life. As in the *Confessions*, in *The Fall* Clamence describes the death of a friend that teaches him the extent to which self-love may insinuate itself even in the most tragic situations: "It is the recently dead we love among our friends, the painful dead, our emotion, ourselves after all" (*The Fall*, 33). Augustine says something very similar when describing his response to the death of an unnamed friend in book 4 of the *Confessions*: "Only tears were sweet to me, and in my 'soul's delights'...weeping had replaced my friend". And he goes on to explain the source of that delight in a way that matches Clamence's insight about grief perfectly: "I was so wretched that that I felt a greater attachment to my life of misery than to my dead friend" (Augustine, *Confessions* 4. 9, 11).

The textual parallels between the two books do not end here. In both the *Confessions* and *The Fall* there is a theft that is used to illustrate the nature and consequences of evil – Augustine's pear story and the missing panel from the Ghent Altarpiece respectively. Moreover in both texts the predominantly Christian orientation of the account is briefly interrupted by a discussion of the Greeks that ultimately proves ineffectual in changing the direction of the narrative. Though the meaning of that interruption in *The Fall* is different from what it is in the *Confessions*, in both instances it is followed by a definitive reassertion of Christian truth that quickly brings all discussion to an end. In Augustine's case it comes in the form of his conversion narrative in *Confessions* book 8; <sup>[4]</sup> in Clamence's through his critically admiring portrait of Jesus and his claim to have brought the proliferation of modern "Christs" to an end through the advent of his own "solution, truth at last..." <sup>[5]</sup> There is also a charming allusion to a similarity in vocations between the two men: Augustine's appointment as Bishop of Hippo is mirrored in Clamence's brief stint as "Pope" in a German POW camp in North Africa, where his duties were largely taken up with negotiating between competing "political and sectarian" groups. <sup>[6]</sup> Negotiation in this instance means getting the other fellow's water ration before he gets yours. Clamence observes that it is thus that "empires and churches are born under

the sun of death” (*The Fall*, 127). The account casts a different light on Augustine’s role in the ecclesiastical conflict (or was that a war?) with the Donatists during his tenure as Bishop of Hippo.

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Camus uses Augustine’s narrative as a template for Clamence’s confession in *The Fall*. But to what end? Is Camus’ critique of modernity to be found in Clamence’s refusal of Augustine’s conversion and his Machiavellian reduction of all love to self-love? Is modernity a corruption of the Christian teaching to be overcome through a return to its preeminent expression in Augustine’s theology? Or is there something in Camus’ reworking of Augustine’s *Confessions* in *The Fall* that suggests that the line between ancients and moderns should be drawn not between Christianity and modernity but between ancients and Christians? It is a difficult question to answer because of the complex biblical and Augustinian imagery that Camus uses to structure *The Fall*. And it is further complicated by the additional layer of meaning found in the iconography of Camus’ books. Nonetheless, I think an answer is possible.

A single episode from the *Confessions* will lead us to the heart of the matter – Augustine’s reading of the “books of the Platonists” and his subsequent failed ascent to God in book 7 (*Confessions* 7.13-24). Camus recreates the narrative context of the episode exactly in *The Fall*. After becoming aware of the duplicitous nature of his loves and struggling frantically and hopelessly to overcome it, Clamence experiences a brief moment of calm lucidity. Having just completed a depressing trip through the “soggy hell” of Zuider Zee, he is arrested by a memory of another journey he had taken years before through the “Greek archipelago” (*The Fall*, 72, 97-98). A journey – undertaken through the Greeks! – which teaches Clamence a “purity of heart” that eases his apocalyptic furies and helps him briefly to put his loves in order.<sup>[7]</sup>

Structurally and contextually Clamence’s journey through the Greek archipelago is equivalent to Augustine’s encounter with the “books of the Platonists” and the erotic ascent that he undertakes as a consequence of reading them. Both men struggle with the duplicity of their loves and both record an encounter with the Greeks that differs qualitatively from their previous efforts and promises to save them from their folly should they be willing to follow its promptings. However, that is where the similarity between the two accounts ends. Camus reformulates Augustine’s encounter with the Greeks in order to give it a different meaning in *The Fall* than it has in the *Confessions*. For Augustine the Greeks are always subordinate to the Christians. The former may provide a kind of propaedeutic to faith, but the final insights are denied to them because these rest on the full revelation of divine reality that is present historically only in Jesus.

Though the Platonists help Augustine to ascend to a vision of God's "invisible nature," he quickly recoils from this insight to return to his "customary condition" (*Confessions* 7.23). What prevents him from completing the ascent and experiencing its consequences is his refusal of "the mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus" (*Confessions* 7.24). Augustine's description of the ascent changes its original Greek meaning and consequences so as to make it conform to the Christian historiography.<sup>[8]</sup> Camus' reformulation of the event in *The Fall* offers a critical assessment of Augustine's interpretation that allows us to consider the Greeks on their own terms and in so doing perhaps to set the historical record straight.

Clamence's recollection of the Greeks is the high point of his confession, the standard by which all other events in *The Fall* are measured. Up to this point he has attempted only to escape outright or sophistically conjure away the dilemma posed by his duplicity and self-love. By contrast, the Greeks encourage him to face that duplicity honestly and even to overcome it by restoring the sense of "proportion" he had lost through the influence of his Christian sensibilities and the natural guilt and tumult of his initial awakening (*The Fall*, 39). Yet for Clamence the Greeks prove as ineffectual in restoring order as they did for Augustine. But this does not mean the failure is the same in both cases. In the *Confessions* Augustine's inability to heal his divided self through an encounter with the Greeks is due to a limitation on the part of the Greeks; in *The Fall* Clamence's inability to achieve the same is due to limitation in himself and in the age of which he is the "fullest expression."

Clamence's fall is an event that occurs in the middle of his narrative and that divides his life into two distinct periods, in much the same way that the biblical fall divides history into two distinct dispensations – the innocence of Eden and the redemption of the final judgement (*The Fall*, 69-71). However, unlike the biblical account, or at least unlike the biblical account as it is interpreted by Christians, Clamence's fall is a salutary event.<sup>[9]</sup> It shatters his innocent or unreflective self-love and makes him aware of his duplicitous nature. His fall therefore entails the possibility of redemption, but everything depends on how he responds to this new awareness. Will he attempt to overcome it by subduing his self-love and cultivating his love of God? Or will he venture the opposite and attempt to silence his conscience in order to achieve a "total" solution akin to the innocent self-love he enjoyed prior to his fall? As it turns out, Clamence does not choose well. But his decision affords Camus the opportunity to explain the manner in which Christianity and modernity issue from their shared rejection of the Greeks.

The total solution Clamence ultimately devises for the problem of human duplicity is not necessitated

the experience of that duplicity itself. That “necessity” comes only after Clamence has rejected the Greek sense of “proportion” inherent in the experience and the purity of heart it calls for in favour of an apocalyptic desire for redemption in which neither purity nor proportion plays any part. However, in order to create the impression that such a solution is needed, Clamence takes an unambiguous experience of moral awakening and turns it into something like a nightmare. The laughter that initially accompanies the experience and which is associated with it throughout *The Fall* neither condemns nor harms Clamence in any way. Indeed Clamence himself describes it as “benevolent” – “a good, hearty, almost friendly laugh, which re-established the proper proportions” (*The Fall*, 96, 39). But it does not remain so.

What troubles Clamence most about the experience is precisely its “benevolent” quality and its playful attempt to “re-establish the proper proportions.” These things both challenge Clamence’s self-love and gently encourage him to do better; and they leave little room for him to evade the criticism through the easy counter-charge of false moralizing or competing self-interest to which those who seek to correct us are often open. The laughter demands nothing for itself and does no harm. It merely tells Clamence the truth about himself without condemnation and with the full range of possible responses left completely open to him, including the one he ultimately settles on. How then does the laughter acquire the “sinister” character it assumes toward the end of the novel (*The Fall*, 96)?

The experience becomes sinister only after Clamence refuses the laughter’s influence altogether and takes matters into his own hands.<sup>[10]</sup> Then the story becomes dark indeed. What begins as a gentle encouragement to mend his ways and live well then becomes so unsupportable that Clamence equates it to the experience of being tortured. The particular device he uses to describe the experience is the “little ease,” a medieval instrument of torture in which a prisoner is confined in a cell that is too short to stand in and too narrow to lie down. In such circumstances the prisoner is never able to feel at ease (*The Fall*, 109). The effect of the punishment is to eliminate delight and create an inescapable sense of guilt (*The Fall*, 110). “Every day through the unchanging restriction that stiffened his body, the condemned man learned that he was guilty and that innocence consists of stretching joyously” (*The Fall*, 109-110). This experience of guilt is both constructed and natural. Its constructed character is apparent in the qualification that Clamence adds to his vigorous denial that it is unnatural. “One could live in those cells and still be innocent? Improbable! Highly improbable! Or else my reasoning would collapse” (*The Fall*, 110). The natural element is a consequence of Clamence being too weak to follow the promptings of his conscience but strong enough to recognize and

acknowledge them. A weak human being's conscience is a torment. Clamence's elaborate sophistries therefore have a natural or psychologically intelligible motivation.

In the *Confessions* Augustine's conversion in book 8 is preceded by images of torture<sup>[11]</sup> that are a prelude to the reconciliation of his two wills.<sup>[12]</sup> Clamence's "little ease" is a depiction of this experience that anticipates a comparable reconciliation. In each narrative that reconciliation is associated with the coming of the Christ. But there is something curious about both accounts in this regard. Earlier in the *Confessions* Augustine makes it clear that salvation comes only through Jesus.<sup>[13]</sup> Yet during the actual conversion scene Jesus is notably absent.<sup>[14]</sup> He is also absent in *The Fall*. Though Clamence discusses the historical Jesus at some length, his account has nothing to do with an affirmation of the orthodox teaching about his messianic role (*The Fall*, 115). Rather what Clamence admires about the man is his character as a human being (*The Fall*, 111-116). However, when it comes time for Clamence's conversion – his solution to the human condition – the Christ is reintroduced, only with Clamence himself playing the role. "Fortunately, I arrived! I am the end and the beginning; I announce the law" (*The Fall*, 118).<sup>[15]</sup> As in the Christian teaching about the fall, here too the apparently insuperable nature of the predicament it describes is answered by an equally extraordinary redemption. But according to Camus' retelling of the story the historical Jesus plays no part in either narrative.

When we first encounter Clamence in *The Fall* he is not a modern but a Christian whose good deeds have become valueless because they are motivated exclusively by self-interest. Clamence's fall affords him an opportunity to overcome this self-interest and achieve existential and moral health through an encounter with the Greeks. Although he refuses that encounter he cannot thereby merely return to his old ways. Awareness is real, so if he wishes to continue satisfying his self-love (and he does) he must therefore devise a way to do so consciously and reflectively. Clamence accomplishes this in part by reducing all love to self-love, thereby eliminating the problem of human duplicity altogether rather than solving it. Camus' identification of Clamence' final solution to the problem of human duplicity with Augustine's conversion is a troubling comparison in this regard.

If Clamence is Augustine and Christianity before his fall, he is Machiavelli and modernity after it. But Camus shows us that there is not so much difference between the accounts as we might think. Self-love under the cover of good deeds and faith is not so different from unabashed self-love. Between the two stand the



Greeks, the only genuine other and the only “true turning point in history.”

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One final word about the religious imagery of Camus’ titles. As I have noted, the titles of the cycles are derived explicitly from a triptych of Greek myths – The Myth of Sisyphus, The Myth of Prometheus, and The Myth of Nemesis. Yet if we consider the titles of Camus’ three final major works (those written during and after the breakdown of the cyclical project as originally conceived) then an interesting biblical pattern emerges. *The Rebel*, *The Fall*, and *The First Man* – the three stages of the traditional Christian teaching about the fall of humanity. But something is not quite right here. According to the Christian account, Adam is the first man. His rebellion against God led to his fall and exile from Eden. However, if that is so then Camus has the chronology wrong. First the first man, then rebellion, then the fall. But this is true only if we ignore the content of Camus’ books and assume that the orthodox Christian teaching was his measure in such matters.

If my reading of *The Fall* is sound, then the meaning of the religious imagery of Camus’ titles is far from orthodox. One of the primary lessons of this book is that the radical divorce between human beings and God that the fall denotes is a definite construction based on a psychologically suspect response to human viciousness and failure. The effective truth of Camus’ critique of that construction in *The Fall* is that *there is no fall*, no radical change in human nature such that an apocalyptic redemption is necessary to overcome it. However, if that is true then we are all the first man, the first human being. The iconography of Camus’ titles teaches us that after we have overcome the madness of our Christian and modern apocalyptic world, what awaits us is not the void that we are so frequently threatened with, but rather friendship with the ancients and the full abundance of human life.

## Notes

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[1] Camus, *Carnets III*, 187. Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, 210, 270. The other term Camus uses to describe this feature of his corpus is “série.” Camus, *Notebooks 1942-1951*, 158.

[2] During the long years, [Christianity] remains the only common hope and the only effective shield against the calamity of the Western world.” Albert Camus, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, trans. Ron



Srigley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007, 133. Much of the historical discussion of the transition from Greek antiquity to Christian and modernity is taken directly from *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*. See Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage International, 1990).

[3] In the *Confessions*, for erotic excesses, see Books 2, 2; 3, 1; 6, 12; for the lust for experience, Books 3, 1-3; 6, 7-9; and for his relation to the highest things, Book 7, 10-21.

[4] In the *Confessions*, Book 7, which explores the inadequacies of the “books of the Platonists” and includes a rather dubious bit of plagiarism from the *Symposium*, is followed by an account of Augustine’s conversion in Book 8.

[5] Camus, *The Fall*, 117.

[6] *Ibid.*, 126. The allusion could easily recall Augustine’s fight against the Donatists, a sect that he ultimately condoned the use of violence to suppress. Clamence claims one of the important things he discovered during his pontifical adventures was how “empires and churches are born under the sun of death.” *Ibid.*, 127.

[7] In the *Zuider Zee* Clamence is travelling at “top speed” yet making no progress. “It’s not navigation but dreaming.” In the Greek archipelago he had the “contrary feeling.” There he and his companions (in Greece he was not alone) were “dawdling” along in their boat yet truly making progress (*The Fall*, 97).

[8] Two particular adjustments come to mind. First, Augustine’s suggestion that Greeks were responsible for a limitation in their account that they were historically incapable of perceiving as such. Second, his claim that because *he* could not complete the erotic ascent the ascent itself was flawed or inadequate. The historical record clearly indicates that the ascent could be completed successfully should one undertaken properly. See Plato, *Symposium*, 210a-211c, a version of which appears to have been Augustine’s source text for his account.

[9] For a different interpretation of the fall, see Martin Buber “The Tree of Knowledge” in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 14-21.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] For example, “With what verbal rods did I not scourge my soul so that it would follow me in my attempt to go after you!” “Such was my sickness and my torture, as I accused myself even more bitterly than usual” (*Confessions* 8.18, 25).

[12] “Therefore there is no monstrous split between willing and not willing. We are dealing with a morbid condition of the mind which, when it is lifted up by the truth, does not unreservedly rise to it but is weighed down by habit. So there are two wills” (*Confessions* 8. 21).

[13] *Confessions* 7. 24.

[14] What really holds Augustine back from his conversion is the thought that he will no longer be able to experience the sensual delights he previously enjoyed, not his unwillingness to accept the risen Christ (*Confessions* 8. 26-27). It is not surprising in this respect that it is a visit from “Lady Continence,” not Jesus

that persuades him to go through with it. Augustine's critique of the Manichees notwithstanding, there is a strong suggestion here that for him the body and its desires are somehow evil and constitute a barrier to redemption (*Confessions* 8. 23).

[\[15\]](#) The remark is a reference to Jesus' statement in Revelation 22:13: "I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (RVS).