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# The woman had to fall? Jean-Baptiste Clamence and the literary infection by evil

## *Summary*

The article presents the concept of evil, as developed in the literary as well as philosophical works of Albert Camus. After a short, preliminary notice on the relationship between literature and evil, the article presents two spheres, in which the problem of evil was grasped by the author of *The Rebel*. In the main part of the article, the complexity of the problem of evil, as represented by Jean-Baptiste Clamence from *The Fall* is shown. It is seen as a development of the concept of evil from *The Plague*, with the potency to disseminate onto others. It is also perceived, as something resulting from severe trauma of the main character. In conclusion, I claim, that the problem of evil, as experienced by Clamence may be understood as a still relevant metaphor of contemporary culture, struggling with passivity against the rise of social evil.

**Keywords:** evil, literature and philosophy, Camus, *The Fall*

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## Introduction: On evil, guilt and literature

Why would philosophers need literature in their contemplation of the problem of evil?<sup>1</sup> In search of the possible roots of their interest in the literary vision of evil, we could perhaps reach back to the times where there were no distinct lines drawn, for example, ancient Greek philosophy. And the simplest answer derived from Greek thought could be that literature allows for separation. Fictional work creates distance. The creation of a character struggling with the problem of evil, and the presentation of the problem of evil in motion by means of the narrative, allows for a different perspective. As such, literature becomes a kind of laboratory for the problem of evil, where writer-philosophers present the problem of the tension between the noble intentions and the evil outcomes of human actions.<sup>2</sup>

The interesting thing about literary laboratories, however, is that that one cannot predict what influence the experiment will have on the readers. When Georges Bataille asked a question about the meaning of the connection between philosophy and literature in his introduction to essays on the problem of literary evil, he made some claims that are worth mentioning here: “Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so. (...) I believe that the Evil – an acute form of evil – which it expresses, has sovereign value for us.”<sup>3</sup> Literature thus not only presents evil: a novel on an evil person makes the literary work engaged with the normative sphere. Even though it only depicts the actions of a person doing something wrong, the book itself becomes “guilty” in the sense

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1 A more general question, regarding the relationship between philosophy and literature is certainly worth asking and has profited with abundant research from philosophers and literature theorists. While it is not the scope of this specific article, it is certainly worth to mention at least three contemporary dimensions of this relationship. First and foremost, we may follow Richard Rorty and consider literature the essential domain of philosophy, going as far as interpreting philosophy as literature (see R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979). The second attitude, I believe much closer to Camus’s perception of literature, is founded on treating literary fiction as a domain of thought experiments, influencing theoretical claims and offering them a sphere to develop in causal and consequentialist environment (for an analysis of literary fiction as the realm of thought experiments, see P. Grabarczyk, *Eksperymenty myślowe w służbie esencjalizmu*, “Filozofia Nauki” 2009, no. 1(65), pp. 23–29). Finally, a discussion in the domain of philosophy of fiction should be considered, offering important conclusions regarding the truth value of sentences from the literary domain, raising questions concerning their usefulness outside the fictional field (see D. Lewis, *Truth in fiction*, “American Philosophical Quarterly” 1978, no. 15(1), pp. 37–46).

2 C.H. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1951, pp. 6–7.

3 G. Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, Penguin Books, London, p. 3.

of engaging us with the problem of evil and demanding a normative reaction to the phenomenon. Bataille says something exceptional about the – we could risk saying – dialectical nature of the traditionally separated notions of content and form. The evil of the content undermines the lack of “innocence” of the form. Both the author who presents literary evil, and the reader who discovers the problem of evil through literature, are in a way, responsible. They are both responsible, because even though the evil they confront is purely fictional, it genuinely demands answering. By not presenting a solution to the problem of evil, the author becomes responsible. By presenting a straightforward answer to the problem of evil he becomes obvious and superficial. By rejecting the evil as portrayed by the novel, the reader isolates the phenomenon from his experience and does not contemplate the possible reaction that could be deemed necessary. Evil in literature asks an important question: “What would you have done?” And this moral reaction to the problem of evil – the reader’s moral reaction, who becomes acknowledged of the problem – as I shall try to present here, is an interesting element in the process of reading Camus’s *The Fall*.

Camus’s last published novel is a book, which ever since its publication, has engaged readers and philosophers in debates on the intersection of moral philosophy and literature.<sup>4</sup> By means of the literary character, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, Camus is portraying the belief in the total impossibility of innocence. Such a state opens up the perspective for the problem of evil, as without the possibility of being innocent, everyone is guilty and thus bears some part of mankind’s responsibility for the existence of evil itself. Even though Camus did portray the problem of evil in numerous novels and philosophical essays (especially in *The Rebel*), the role of *The Fall* is unique and specific. The novel might be considered a phenomenological exploration of the problem. It presents a person struggling with evil, without any attempt at moralising, without any inherent commentary. Clamence is the sole narrator of the book, and the lack of any other narrative only condenses the novel more closely around the only issue the main character is struggling with. On the level of guilt, as Bataille mentioned, *The Fall* is completely guilty: there is no hint whatsoever as to the attitude one should take when confronted with the character of Clamence. On the philosophical level, especially the moral level, such a reaction

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4 Albert Camus Bibliography [online] <https://www.boisestate.edu/camusbibliography/3-4-la-chute-the-fall/> (access 29.08.2019) contains a list of numerous contemporary articles and book chapters dedicated to deciphering Camus’s last published novel. While it is not the purpose of this article to review recent contemporary interpretations of *The Fall*, one should certainly pay special attention to the magnificent collection of essays, *Textes, intertextes, contextes. Autour de La Chute*, edited by R. Gay-Crosier (1993). Out of many earlier works engaged in the problem of Camus’s novel, R. Girard’s article, *Camus’s Stranger Retired* (1964), deserves special attention.

is, however desired, as Clamence's conception of evil is especially deceitful and disturbingly relevant.

One more introductory note has to be made. We have already stated that literature is of interest to philosophy because of the possibility it offers when presenting evil. The presentation, however, is not innocent and bears significant moral problems regarding both the author's and reader's responsibility. In the case of *The Fall*, both the reader, as well as the philosophically oriented interpreter, may be lured into an act of understanding in which the central theme and its significance override the context and subplots, the main text dominates the hesitations enclosed in the footnotes, and the clarity of central figures eliminates the importance of understatements. I propose, that we should invert these figures and offer an interpretation of *The Fall* in which the central elements, like the famous woman on the bridge, must withdraw to the background. Consequently, elements of the background will demand closer inspection and focus. Such elements, as I will try to demonstrate, may become convenient tools for orienting ourselves in the maze of meanings within *The Fall*.

## Part 1: On the genealogy of evil leading to *The Fall*

Before proceeding to the problem of evil in *The Fall*, a general outline of Camus's understanding of evil is needed. This issue is much more complex and demands some typology. In recent work on the issue, Matthew Sharpe<sup>5</sup> makes important distinctions regarding Camus's view on the phenomenon of evil. He observes that at least two essential categories of evil are present in his work, relating to the metaphysical as well as social dimensions of the phenomenon.

Initially, Camus's occupation with the problem of evil reaches back to his studies in Algiers where he developed a thesis about the relationship between Greek thought and Christianity (OCI, 999–1084).<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, his early concept of evil is derived from St. Augustine, and evil is understood here as either a natural element of the human condition, or as an element of the moral action of a free-willed agent. Already, in the early stages of his career Camus was interested in the relationship between the natural and moral evil. He assumed that the latter should to be considered a reaction to divine or natural evil, a form of metaphysical rebellion against misery, suffering, and death. The process of becoming evil is not

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<sup>5</sup> M. Sharpe, *After the Fall: Camus on evil*, [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evil*, edited by T. Nys et al., Routledge, Abingdon-on-Thames 2019.

<sup>6</sup> All references to Albert Camus, unless indicated otherwise, refer to the most comprehensive source of his works, the four volume edition *Œuvres complètes* published by Gallimard, Paris 2006–2008, abbreviated in this manuscript as OCI, OCII, OCIII, OCIV.

only a reaction to the existence of natural evil experienced by human beings. It is consequently amplified by the fact that natural evil is simultaneously understood as a form of harmony-bringing process, by which we are reminded that we have corrupted our souls by acts of free will, and that we must be punished for the sins that result from these actions. The punishment, however, only strengthens the will to reform the world by consequent acts of rebellion. Camus was especially interested in the fact, that in the Augustinian view of the problem, only free will, accompanied by God's grace, could provide escape from the corruption. The lack of acceptance of natural evil, the refusal to understand the harmony-bringing process as an element of the nature of the world are symptoms of man's departure from grace.

In his works on the absurd, especially in the philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (OCI, 219–320), Camus evidently engages in the problem of evil, but given his main (although certainly not isolated) focus on the epistemological rather than normative aspect of the human condition, he does not engage too deeply in the relationship between the absurd and the problem of evil in the bespoken essay. The publication of *Letters to a German Friend* (OCII, 3–34) marks a significant evolution of this attitude; Camus clearly moves on from the descriptive to the normative problems of experiencing the absurd. In short, only after having dedicated great effort to describing the problem of the absurd and the possible consequences of the experience on the human being, can Camus develop the moral reflection towards a better understanding of the relationship between absurdity and the problem of evil. Camus concludes, that absurdity may lead to nihilism, granting the subject the belief, that performing evil acts, like killing others, in an apparently meaningless world, cannot encounter any serious moral objections. The human being experiences the absurd, which is understood as the tension between human desire for meaning and the lack of meaning offered by the world the human being lives in. Evil is not a necessary reaction to this experience, but it is one of the possible outcomes of the absurd experience. When a person kills another human being, he puts himself in a position of power, and so restores meaning through an act of destruction, not creation. If there are no transcendent rules to obey, one is free to create rules of his own, and nothing will stop the subject from choosing dominance and power. And the subject confirms his power, by killing and by conquest, which, Camus concludes, is actually represented by his *German Friend's* activity.

But to Camus, this God-like power for taking away life turns out to produce no meaning at all. It does not bring the desired feeling of harmony, but instead – solitude. Moreover, such person discovers that such destruction cannot be undone. Caligula, the hero of Camus's play discovers that he cannot become like the gods. Although he can equal them in destruction, he is unable to bring the dead back to life (OCI, 367). The positions of the other characters of Camus's dramas and novels from the absurd cycle, in regard to the problem of evil, are rather more complex

than homogenous. Members of society perceive Meursault as evil, so that he can be understood and condemned, so as to make his absurd crime seem logical. Martha, from *The Misunderstanding*, lacks the profundity of Caligula's intentions and is limited by her very shallow idea of happiness, leading her to criminal activity. She may be considered evil, given the fact that in order to obtain happiness she does not find anything wrong with killing her guests, but it would be highly debatable whether one could compare the level of her corruption with the one that occupies Camus after 1943. Caligula, in one of his moments of deep insight about the consequences of his actions, shows a deep awareness of the inadequacy between means and ends: "murder is not a solution" (OCI, 387). Having both experienced and performed evil he genuinely wants to be overruled, and his last words "I am still alive!" (OCI, 388), can be seen rather as a warning: there is a dangerous potency in each of us to become like him.

For Camus, the true problem of contemporary moral evil begins, however, when a human being becomes convinced that he can justify murder by means of logic and reason (OCIII, 63–64). An affirmative answer to the question: "do we have the right to kill others?" replaces Caligula's position. A metaphysical rebellion against death and absurdity, as portrayed by Caligula, is replaced by a revolution that justifies killing as a necessary element in the production of social and existential well-being. Murder, which previously was individual, becomes universalized (OCIII, 306–313). In its most acute form – defined as historical murder – murder is given justification, and as such it is no longer considered evil. If one rebels against the historical and philosophical justification for murder, one must resort to faith, or God and his commandment: "Thou shall not kill". Such a possibility is, however, according to Camus, problematic: it condemns evil, but does not eliminate it from the history and the experience of the human being (OCIII, 307). Camus presents this problem also on literary grounds in *The Plague*. There, the character of Father Paneloux represents the Christian dilemma of the means of confronting evil. And even though the character changes his early, Augustinian attitude towards evil (OCII, 98–101), for a more compassionate, solidary approach (OCII, 186–192), it seems curiously ineffective in reaction to the evil he recognizes under the guise of the disease.<sup>7</sup> This is perhaps because the nature of evil has changed as well, without making Paneloux fully aware of the process. When we are confronted with the Plague – a natural disease, an exemplar of natural or divine evil – we can use the Augustinian metaphysics of evil to create a description of the problem. The corruption of human nature is responsible for the occurrence of the disease, interpreted as a punishment sent from above. Paneloux becomes fully aware – after having

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<sup>7</sup> This lack of effectiveness is also criticized by Camus in public speeches. His opinion about the role of the Church when confronted with the political evil of fascism and Nazism was highly critical (OCII, 471–472).

experienced the death of an innocent child – that the metaphysical description of evil is woefully inadequate for the problem of contemporary evil. Therefore, in his second sermon, he does not present the plague as a punishment anymore. Still, he tries to embrace it on purely theoretical, rather than action-oriented grounds. But the action-oriented approach to evil, Camus claims, as manifested by the ill-conceived revolutionary movements, demands the legitimization of murder, and the abolition of freedom and human dignity in order to reach the desired historical ends of humanity. In both cases the evil persists. Moreover, and more importantly, Camus makes an exceptional remark on the nature of evil in *The Plague*: Evil is contagious. This is caught by the Tarrou's reflection (OCII, 208–210): evil spreads, it is transferable from man to man, so it must have a different nature than being purely a privation, an absence of good. It is possible to control evil, but not to eliminate it. Transmissible and omnipresent, it demands constant governance and effort by the human being, to keep it isolated. And even though the moral evil of human beings can be put back under control, as the ending of *The Plague* suggests, one cannot completely eliminate the possibility of human evil taking control over individuals once again. Furthermore, control over moral evil does not alleviate the problem of natural evil. One can abstain from killing, or be ready to suffer the consequences for unavoidable acts of killing, but one is nevertheless condemned to die, which is the only evil in the human condition that cannot be truly resolved or eliminated.

Moral evil requires subjective control, so as not to become aligned with the evil performed by others. But what should one do against the evil endangering our existence and exercised by others upon us? An effective way of eliminating external, moral evil for Tarrou seems to be condemned to have to resort to murder and killing that is directed against those who had performed killing in the name of the alleged reparation of the world (OCII, 208–209). Camus consequently develops this issue in the play, *The Just Assassins*, in presenting the dilemmas of the revolutionary, Kaliayev. Once a person yields to political murder in an attempt to restore justice and harmony in the world, he is no longer morally allowed to believe that he will be able to control himself in future decisions. Not being able to justify murder (as that would be self-defeating), the only option that remains for Kaliayev is self-sacrifice. This element of Camus's reflection, especially the idea of compensating for the evil of taking away life by offering one's own life afterwards, understandably caused a stir and debate, and still remains controversial today.<sup>8</sup> We may only conclude here, regarding the relation of the issue to the problem of

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<sup>8</sup> See P. Thody, *Albert Camus 1913–1960*, Macmillan, London 1961, p. 127; G. Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies*, Free Press, New York 1963, pp. 39–40; H. Hochberg, *Albert Camus and the Ethic of Absurdity*, [in:] *Contemporary European Ethics – Selected Readings*, edited by J. Kockelmans, Anchor, New York 1972, p. 345; J. Foley, *From the absurd to revolt*, Acumen, Stocksfield 2008, p. 95.

evil, that it seems that for Camus it is permissible to kill another highly dangerous human being, but that such an act can never be generalized or universalized. Murder can never be justified, leading Camus to have a stubborn condemnation for the death penalty (OCIV, 125–170), and to the conviction that the consequences of killing must always be severe for the perpetrator. This can be interpreted, coming back to the literary source of *The Plague*, as a necessary element of control over human evil.

In the remaining part of this article, I would like to focus solely on the issue of evil generated by human beings: the perpetrators responsible for violence and harm against other persons. Tarrou mentions that one must use one's conscience in a moral attempt to control evil so as not to allow it spread. What does this mean, though, and how do we – non-metaphorically – infect others with evil? An obvious paradox with such an understanding of evil is that if we are all capable of doing evil things, then the conception of evil as also being contagious seems obsolete. We spread evil by making evil things. It seems to me, however, that the problem could be solved in the following way: it is by experiencing evil from the other that our own control over evil deteriorates. Experiencing or being witness to evil does indeed seriously affect our moral attitude and leads to what Camus believes to be a loss of control over the limits of human moral behaviour.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of political ideology, the Camusian answer is quite simple: we spread evil if we make others believe that they will be not made responsible or guilty for the crimes they have committed. We make others believe that the end will justify the means, and that executioners will be absolved from having made their victims suffer. The death of Kaliayev is convenient for the elimination of the problem of guilt and responsibility. It seemingly ends the dilemma in which the protagonist of Camus's play was engaged. But on a moral level it is certainly worth asking: what are the consequences of living on that are feared by Tarrou, and not experienced by Kaliayev? And these consequences, related strongly to the problem of infection with evil by a person actively engaged in morally wrong actions is brilliantly developed in *The Fall*, to which we shall now proceed.

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<sup>9</sup> An example of real events in line with such reasoning can be found in witness accounts of concentration camp prisoners, who spoke of the growing indifference to other's suffering of inmates. One of them was asked about the mob law that functioned in Auschwitz. Prisoners suspected of stealing the food of other inmates were strangled by other prisoners at night: "(Kazimierz Piechowski, former Auschwitz prisoner): »What was done to get rid of such people? They were liquidated. The prisoners killed them at night. (...)«; (Interviewer): »And you didn't feel anything? This was normal?«; (Kazimierz Piechowski) »Absolutely, it was completely normal, except for a kind of flash, subconscious perhaps: God, and still things such as this are happening. And still things such as this. But these things couldn't be helped«, *Auschwitz, The final solution*, dir. Laurence Rees, et al., BBC, London 2005, 10:03–11:03.



## Part 2: Evil, responsibility, and guilt: *The Fall*

Camus's preoccupation with the problem of evil from the point of view of the absurd and rebellion cycles may be considered as an engagement with the problem of an individual's reaction to the experience of natural or divine evil. Moreover, in the laboratory of novels and plays, the author tries to understand the possibility of becoming morally evil, being possessed by either individual nihilism, like Martha and Caligula, or political ideology, like Stephan and the addressee of his *Letters to a German Friend*. In the 1950's he becomes intriguingly interested with the growing evidence of his belief that there is something infectious about evil. In the intersubjective realm, this relation is also burdened with the desire of the perpetrator of the evil to eliminate or dilute his feelings of guilt. He would certainly agree with Czesław Miłosz, whose *The Captive Mind* he admired,<sup>10</sup> that following the problem of the secularisation of evil, the problem of guilt has consequently changed in significant way. The transference of human evil is related to the problem of transference of guilt. In *The Rebel*, Camus observes that the main problem for the executioner would be the innocence of his victim. The evil develops (and spreads) then, not only by the proliferation of executioners (e.g. by means of political ideology), but also by achieving a situation in which the victims feel guilty (OCIII, 218). To spread evil, the executioners must then destroy their victims' belief in innocence. In this situation of victims and executioners, the idea of evil as reflected upon by Camus is this: the source of evil (the executioner) is aware of his guilt and tries to share this guilt with others. Not only with other executioners by making claims about an alleged redemption achieved through History, but also with their victims, by making claims about their alleged guilt. It is precisely this element of the problem of evil that I argue Camus wanted to develop in more detail in *The Fall*. While *The Plague* was a literary attempt at presenting the possibility of control of human, moral evil; *The Fall*, conversely, shows how evil can transgress the boundaries between subjects. Interestingly, and in line with the aforementioned concept of literary guilt, the novel also transgresses the borders between fiction and reality, as eventually we – the readers – become the main targets of Jean-Baptiste Clamence's masterplan.

Clamence, the main protagonist in *The Fall*, makes multiple attempts to reduce his feelings of guilt and his recognition of the fact that he has lost control over evil, that it has essentially corrupted his sense of dignity. If we follow, chronologically, Clamence's story, we can arrive at the conviction that he was doing all the best in his life and that his early career as a lawyer did allow him to spread goodness and obtain happiness. This stance was interrupted by his inability to act on the bridge

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<sup>10</sup> Assumption made by the author on basis of the unpublished correspondence between Miłosz and Camus.

to save a suicidal woman, leading to his moral demise. The situation, however, as I will try to show, is much more complex. If we consider the most highlighted story presented by Clamence as the source of his corruption, then we arrive at a discussion – yet again – on the commonly debated problems of the post-war period. Are we all guilty of not having done anything to confront the evil that had spread during the prosecution and extermination of the Jews in European countries?<sup>11</sup> Clamence finds himself guilty of having done nothing when another human being needed assistance, and presents the story of the woman on the Parisian bridge as, arguably, the main source of his corruption and of the consequent spread of his own disease. But why bother with the whole plan of making others share guilt, if all others are already guilty? The answer would be, that Clamence is sure, on the one hand, that there are qualitative differences in guilt; while on the other, he is also aware of the presence of others who did resist and confront the evil. And so, the great difficulty for Clamence is not only the existence of evil, but the awareness, that at least some did rebel against it, even if it resulted in their death. The situation becomes even more nuanced when Clamence makes his final confession: in a camp in Africa, where he was responsible for distributing water, he drank a dying comrade's portion of water, having assumed that his survival chances were higher than those of a person in agony (OCIII, 753–755). If we compare the situations from the bridge and from the camp in relation to the problem of evil, we can see an asymmetry: it is wrong not to help someone whose life is threatened (the woman on a bridge), it is arguably worse to diminish someone else's chances of survival in a camp by taking away his water.<sup>12</sup> This act can be seen as the negative baptism of the hero of *The Fall*, and having severe consequences, together with his inability to act when the woman needed assistance in Paris. Clamence may feel guilty, but he is not responsible for the death of the allegedly suicidal woman. But he is both guilty and responsible for the death of his comrade in the prison camp, because he had decided to save himself from death by stealing the water. And the moral paralysis he experiences in Paris may be seen as the traumatic aftermath of his experience of

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<sup>11</sup> K. Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, Indigo, Toronto 2001.

<sup>12</sup> In one of reviews of this article an interesting point was raised, namely, that it is actually worse not to help the woman on the bridge. In the camp, Clamence seems to be in a “life-boat” situation, influencing his moral decisionmaking, and it is debatable whether he did wrong. My point here, however, is that not doing anything on the bridge, did not worsen the situation of the woman – she still was in a life threatening situation, resulting from her decision to jump. On the contrary, taking the water must have resulted in the worsening of the condition of Clamence's comrade. Taking into account the “victim's” perspective, Clamence's inability to act on the bridge did not deteriorate the situation of the woman. Taking the water, though, I argue, did deteriorate the condition of the dying prisoner.

evil in the war camp.<sup>13</sup> This guilt and this responsibility are a kind of psychological trauma, which clearly haunts the hero of the book.<sup>14</sup> Its importance for the character is amplified by its place in the novel: it is told in the last part of Clamence's confession, when resigned, diseased, and possibly foreseeing his imminent death, he decides to tell the truth.<sup>15</sup> Having to choose whether one should improve his own chances of survival or share those chances equally with others has haunted many prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates. Historically, this kind of additional moral suffering was intentionally added to the structure of the violence in the concentration camps. The wardens knew that there was not enough food for a person to survive more than three months. The prisoners were aware of the impossibility of surviving the camp, of being intentionally deprived of hope (Deem 2012, 18–20). Coming back to the initial reflection on Bataille from the introduction, we can see that this particular piece of literature, *The Fall*, is not innocent: it is genuinely the narrator's intention to dispense with the guilt resulting from his experience of moral evil onto his listener and onto the reader themselves.

Evil in the human being becomes even more active and less controllable once the person is, or feels, isolated, excluded, and separated from others. Not being able to cope with his trauma and feeling of individual guilt, Clamence tries to universalize it. Instead of dialogue, the peaceful way to reach others, the isolated person "communicates" with others through violence, murder, and power relations, enslaving and forcing others to end his solitude by forcibly entering the lives of others. When Clamence speaks, he speaks abusively, he speaks intelligently. He speaks violently, because the sole purpose of his speaking is making the interlocutor be silent, be passive, be reactive. It is in silence that we accept evil. Instead of following the positive claim in *The Rebel*: "Parler répare" (OCIII, 68), we are being forced into a situation where "Se taire, détruit". It is in speech that we manifest revolt against evil; the initial "no" of the rebel must be communicated to the person whom he wants to confront. The world of Clamence is the world of monologues, not dialogues; because dialogues can modify the positions of the persons involved. And Clamence, by all means, does not want to change; he wants others to become infected by the consequences of his own possession by evil, his own disease, which he finds incurable.

We may feel little sympathy for the character possessed by evil and presented by Camus in *The Renegade*. He is lost, more and more isolated, becoming more and more

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<sup>13</sup> M. Longstaffe, *The Fiction of Albert Camus: A Complex Simplicity*, Peter Lang, Bern 2007, pp. 189–190.

<sup>14</sup> S. Felman, *Camus' The Fall, or the Betrayal of the Witness*, [in:] *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, edited by S. Felman, D. Laub, Routledge, New York 2013.

<sup>15</sup> S. Ungar, *Scandal And Aftereffect: Blanchot and France since 1930*, University Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1995, p. 30.

fanatical. The case of Clamence is quite different: he is genuinely evil and at the same time attractive. In theatrical adaptations of the novel, he usually very quickly achieves a fine communication with the audience; and one can sometimes genuinely feel a rising sympathy for the character among the viewers, as if they were attending a stand-up comedy show. The state of relaxation that occurs when one reads or listens to Clamence is alarming; it is exactly because of this state that we tend to be much more easily convinced by his narrative, together with its dangerous consequences.

By openly confessing his sins, we find Clamence deceptively honest. It strengthens our feeling of his honesty when he frankly admits that some of his stories are completely made up (OCIII, 761). When he openly says that the sole purpose of his narrative is seduction and possession, we feel fully secured because we have been warned (OCIII, 762). But, at the very end, the person who has denied water to a dying comrade wants us to confess, to join the forcedly horizontal moral sphere in which Clamence strives to exist. And this is exactly the very moment we have to remember what Tarrou said about evil, and, as readers endangered by this attempt to make us inmates of Clamence's hell, we have to resist the call. This decision is made much more difficult once we remember that Clamence must have gone through a moral, personal hell living with the post-camp trauma, which arguably shaped his entire enterprise for becoming a judge-penitent. The decision to publish *The Fall* must have been very hard for Camus, because the novel does not offer a solution to evil that so prominently emanated from *The Plague*.<sup>16</sup> In a famous debate between Roland Barthes and Camus, Barthes accused Camus of making the struggle against evil look so easy: after all, everyone will be attracted by the call to fight the Plague, because the Plague does not have anything humane in it. It could be argued that even though Camus was strongly opposed to Barthes' claims,<sup>17</sup> he did listen, because the evil in *The Fall* has the very humane face of Clamence.

Władysław Stróżewski once compared the relationship between philosophy and literature to the act of looking in the mirror.<sup>18</sup> Philosophy finds itself in the act: the reflection offered by the mirror of literature fulfils philosophical reflection. Henri Petit, one of the early, insightful critics of *The Fall*, remarked: "Jean-Baptiste Clamence is the mirror, reflecting everything that is negative in our times" (OCIII, 1369, own translation). The sole purpose of the reflection, in which we only find the negative and the evil, is to find in oneself, the deeply philosophical grounds

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<sup>16</sup> Camus was irritated by the constant criticisms of *The Plague*, that it offered a kind of Red Cross morality. However strongly he opposed these claims, they have possibly influenced the composition of *The Fall*. There are no evident moral conclusions offered by the book.

<sup>17</sup> R. Barthes, *Annales d'une épidémie ou roman de la solitude?*, "Bulletin du Club du Meilleur Livre", February 1955, pp. 4–8.

<sup>18</sup> W. Stróżewski, *Literatura i filozofia*, "Ruch Literacki" 1995, no. 6, p. 693.

for the goodness and dignity to resist the image. About these grounds, however, the book says nothing. If literature is not innocent, this silence demands courage, and above all, hope, that there is a disposition in the reader not to follow Alamance.

The recognition of evil in another human being often leads others to the condemnation and to the isolation of the possessed individual. The process, however, leads to unfortunate outcomes, like the conviction that the German Nazis, the truly evil hosts of Auschwitz death camp, are in some way ontologically alien to the rest of humanity. And yet, Camus argues that each one of us shares a disposition towards evil; nobody is free from the plague. It is not a difference in nature, but a difference in the control of nature, the control of humans' natural desire to become meaningful, perhaps even immortal. By making the claim that each of us carries a disposition towards evil, Camus could have contributed to the discussion, which years later split intellectuals, on the claims by Hannah Arendt regarding the nature of evil, after her publication on Eichmann.<sup>19</sup> And quite possibly he would have agreed with Susan Neiman's claim that "Auschwitz was conceptually devastating because it revealed a possibility in human nature that we hoped not to see" (Neiman 2002, 254). Thus, when Clamence, in his narrative, smoothly changes from "I" to "We" in an attempt to have the listener become burdened with his own moral failings (OCIII, 762), he does have grounds to believe he may succeed.

One could argue that Clamence was, before becoming the judge-penitent, yet another victim of the terror imposed upon him in that very moment he was forced to decide who should survive and who should die in the African camp. As such, he shared the same horrible burden as many of the survivors of the atrocities of the concentration camps in Europe did. In the end, we could say that Clamence is doubly diseased: he is plagued by a disease that any one of us can have and can transfer to others, the evil that can arise from our insistence on meaning and purpose in life; and he is also plagued by the post-camp trauma, which makes any of his consequent moral decisions much more difficult. A traumatized holocaust survivor who suffered from the immense and intentional process of destruction of all meaning, had immense problems in readapting. Multiple cases of suicide among holocaust survivors shows, acutely, how deeply these people have been affected.<sup>20</sup> One of symptoms of post traumatic disorders is a state called paroxysmal hypermnesia,<sup>21</sup> the necessity to continuously re-live the traumatic situations that haunt the victim of the camp. This experience has had a severe impact on the survivors. Jean Améry, who survived Auschwitz concentration camp, remarked that no one who went through the expe-

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<sup>19</sup> H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Viking Press, New York 1963.

<sup>20</sup> Y. Barak, *Increased risk of attempted suicide among aging holocaust survivors*, "American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry" 2005, no. 13(8), pp. 701-704.

<sup>21</sup> W. Póltawska, *Stany hipermnjezi napadowej u byłych więźniów obserwowane po 30 latach*, "Przegląd Lekarski" 1978, no. 35(1), pp. 20-24.

rience would ever wish for its recurrence.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as psychiatric studies have shown, traumatized people have to re-live it constantly. In this context, Clamence's final cry: "O young girl, throw yourself again into the water so that I might have a second time the chance to save the two of us!" (OCIII, 765) is significant. He may be seen as simply being obsessed with the evil he has witnessed and experienced, and dreams of the possibility of the abolition of his condition. Significantly, Clamence does not exclaim: "Get me back to the camp in Africa, so I can save my comrade!", because, in agreement with Améry's claim, this is exactly the situation he never wants to reappear, and which, possibly, constantly reappears in his mind nevertheless.

Clamence is also profoundly struck, not only by the evil he has witnessed, but also by the possibility of having confronted the evil that so many others chose, and by this choice met their fate. Duguesclin's appearance in the camp (OCIII, 755) is a burden for the survivor, because he knows that evil could have been confronted. In reality, the character may refer to Simone Weil, who, preceding Jasper's conclusions on metaphysical guilt, made her decision to take on her responsibility and enforce upon herself the conditions others had had to endure under Nazi occupation. In 1943, diagnosed with tuberculosis, she persistently limited the amount of food she ate to the level she believed was rationed to the people in occupied countries. As the existence of others may influence our decision to do wrong, it seems from Clamence's narrative that the existence of Duguesclin may have seriously impacted on his decision regarding water distribution: "If he was there, because of the love I had for the man, I would have resisted longer" (OCIII, 755). It should be stressed here – for the defence of Clamence, that this statement bears, indirectly, an important ethical message. The death of the person, being a moral beacon for Clamence, might have deprived him of faith in the virtues of the deceased character.<sup>23</sup>

By publishing *The Fall*, Camus voiced the concern that no one is free from the moral responsibility of the horrible historical events of war and occupation, and, more importantly, that these events, disturbingly, assisted in making further moral choices even more difficult. *The Fall*, in this view, could be seen as an appendix to Jasper's concept of metaphysical guilt, presenting the potentially dangerous consequences of the continuous experience of guilt and trauma. With such an interpretation of evil we may feel, on the one hand, that there is something seriously wrong with post-war humanism too hesitantly reacting to the disturbing news of genocide, and terror in USSR. On the other hand, this does not mean that the study of Clamence

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<sup>22</sup> J. Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1977, p. 116.

<sup>23</sup> It may be possible to interpret Clamences' persistence to find Christ guilty as an aftereffect of having witnessed Duguesclin's firm ethical stance. Christ and Duguesclin are mentioned by Clamence as the people he truly loves. But this admiration deepens his feeling of guilt, so he has to find evidence of Christ's failure to be innocent. Perhaps, only with Christ being guilty, and his follower – Duguesclin – dead, can Clamence stop resisting the evil.

and his conscience is an apology for the existence of evil. Camus never agreed with Sartre's view on the relationship between violence and freedom. On the contrary, Camus's stubborn appeal to limits constantly irritated other thinkers and made him enemies on virtually all sides of the political fence. The confrontation with evil, the confrontation with Clamence, seen as a modern embodiment of human evil, must be carried out. Such a struggle with the will for power and domination, as Camus had warned in *The Rebel*, must, however, be very selective and thoughtful regarding the means of engagement. On one side, once the reaction to Clamence's claims that we are supposedly on the same horizontal moral plane becomes violent, that is, confrontational, not dialogical, Camus's hero actually succeeds in reaching his goal, as one becomes then yet another person in need for the confession of his guilt. On the other side, once the reaction to Clamence becomes too permissive, we are in danger of sympathy, which he continuously attempts to use against us.

## Conclusion

The evil manifested by Clamence has its foundation in the totality of guilt. It is only, when all people are guilty and feel responsible for the moral, cultural, and religious failure of their civilisation, that this "plagued" conscience can develop and succeed. This success is achieved by Clamence in the moment the interlocutor accepts full responsibility and condemns himself in the repetition of the sentence "It is too late, it is always too late". To make sure the lack of innocence is total, Clamence burns the last bridge to salvation by openly manifesting the guilt of Christ, and the impossibility of innocence on both the human and divine levels.<sup>24</sup> It is only on the condition that the reader accepts this guilt, together with despair, that nothing can be done. This is the moment when evil, as spread by Clamence, triumphs, in isolation and despair. But even on a human level, without going into a detailed discussion on the metaphysical aspects of guilt and responsibility, we are aware that people forgive; wrongdoers are capable of accepting responsibility for their actions without the desire to burden others for their crimes.

Camus insisted, that it is necessary to accept "reasonable guilt", which he understood as an evasion of "impossible innocence" (OCIII, 70). Clamence claims he accepts guilt: he openly enumerates his moral failures. But the truly evil thing about this strategy is that it is not aimed at – as in Christian confession – receiving abso-

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<sup>24</sup> A response to Clamence's claim, that a proof of Christ's guilt was hidden, could be that it is clearly visible in the New Testament: *And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God (Mark, 10:18). Christ does not present himself here as absolutely innocent and free from sin.*

lution and redemption, but only attention.<sup>25</sup> He does not believe anybody has the power to absolve him of his wrongdoings. He does believe, however, that by openly manifesting his corruption, he obtains the power to judge others (OCIII, 762), and to gain dominance over anyone who follows him in the confessional act. This literary character openly assumes the immoral stance as presented by Camus in *The Rebel*. Clamence restores universal sin, but without the compensation of grace so as to accept the force that negates him (OCIII, 376). Here, I believe, we arrive at the core of the problem of the secularisation of evil. It is not, by any means, a fully secularized notion. Camus was convinced that the secularisation has led to a dead-end. There is the notion of universal sin (e.g. against History), of collective responsibility, but there is hardly any concept of grace, forgiveness, redemption or charity. Worse still, the character, like Clamence, is aware of their former importance but experiences and laments (like Nietzsche) their fading. And although Camus did envisage the possibility of a renaissance, in dialogue, forgiveness, and measure (OCIII, 324), there is only monologue, resentment, and excess in Clamence.

In the end, Camus identifies evil as something, that having undergone the long and painful process of secularization is, above all, persistently inscribed into the human condition. His exceptional character from *The Plague*, Tarrou, makes us fully aware of this fact: evil is like an infection, it may spread to others through our actions. But, like an infection, it can also be stopped, or at least controlled, by human activity. And perhaps having recognized such nature of evil we are fully responsible for, we should rather ask others how can we avoid the epidemic, while accepting the reasonable guilt that allows for necessary action. If literary evil, as introduced by Clamence, can teach us anything, it is perhaps that we still need dialogues – like those between Tarrou and Rieux, instead of monologues, in order to confront and control evil. *Dialoguer, réparé?*

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<sup>25</sup> Camus was a patient reader of Alfred Adler, and Clamence's character seems very closely related to the psychological trait described by the psychiatrist: "The vain person always knows, how to transfer responsibility for any mistakes on other's shoulders. He is always right, others are always wrong [...] the vain individual is occupied with complaints, excuses and finding alibis. We deal here with many tricks of the human soul's attempts at maintaining, at all costs, the sense of superiority and protection of vanity from any insult", A. Adler, *Connaissance de l'homme*, Payot, Paris 1949, p. 121, translation by the author.



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Maciej Kałuża

## Dziewczyna musiała upaść? Jean-Baptiste Clamence i literacka infekcja złem

### *Streszczenie*

Artykuł przedstawia koncepcję zła, rozwiniętą zarówno w dziełach literackich, jak i filozoficznych Alberta Camusa. Po wstępnym omówieniu o związku między literaturą a złem, w artykule przedstawiam dwie sfery, w których problem zła został uchwycony przez autora *Człowieka zbuntowanego*. W głównej części artykułu ukazana zostaje złożoność problemu zła, którą reprezentuje postać Jean-Baptiste Clamence'a z *Upadku*. Zło jest postrzegane w kontekście refleksji zawartych w *Dżumie*, szczególnie w związku z jego możliwością rozprzestrzeniania się, infekowania innych. Ale jest również analizowane jako coś wynikającego z ciężkiej, wojennej traumy głównego bohatera. W podsumowaniu argumentuję, że problem zła, którego doświadcza Clamence, może być rozpatrywany jako wciąż aktualna metafora współczesnej kultury, zmagającej się z biernością wobec zła społecznego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zło, literatura a filozofia, Camus, *Upadek*

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