

Published in: *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol.40, no.7, 2008

Bridging Literary and Philosophical Genres: Judgement, Reflection and Education in Camus' *The Fall*

PETER ROBERTS
University of Auckland

Abstract

*Both literature and philosophy, as genres of writing, can enable us to address important ontological, epistemological and ethical questions. One author who makes it possible for readers to bridge these two genres is Albert Camus. Nowhere is this more evident than in Camus' short novel, *The Fall*. The Fall, through the character and words of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, prompts readers to reflect deeply on themselves, their motivations and commitments, and their relations with others. This paper discusses the origin and structure of the book, identifies some of its key philosophical themes, and explores some of its educational implications.*

Keywords: Albert Camus, *The Fall*, literature, ethics, reflection

Introduction

Albert Camus has long been regarded as one of the most ‘philosophical’ of twentieth century novelists. He laid no claim to the title ‘philosopher’ himself, and some have been quick to reinforce this view. Walter Kaufmann (1959), for example, in a discussion of existentialism and death, is rather dismissive of what he sees as Camus’ two philosophical works: *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1991) and *The Rebel* (Camus, 1953). Kaufmann endorses Henri Peyre’s judgement of these books as ‘not only contradictory, but confused and probably shallow and immature’ (cited in Kaufmann, 1959, p. 87). After critiquing the concept of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Kaufmann concludes that ‘Camus is a fine writer, but not a philosopher’ (p. 90). Others have reached quite different conclusions. Thomas Hanna (1958), for instance, writing around the same time as Kaufmann, saw Camus as ‘one of the most prophetic, persuasive, and hopeful moral philosophers of the mid-20th century’ (p. viii). For Hanna, *The Myth of Sisyphus* provides a searching examination of some of the most important philosophical themes of Camus’ age. *The Rebel*, too, has received high praise from others. Russell Ford (2004), for example, maintains that *The Rebel* is ‘one of the most profound and under-studied pieces of political theory composed during the 20th century’ (p. 86).

Kaufmann’s focus is on Camus’ non-fiction, and his assessment is of Camus as philosopher. When attention is paid to Camus’ full corpus of published writings, however, it becomes possible to speak of *philosophical readings* of works that were

not intended as works of philosophy. With this shift in focus, scholarship in the years following the publication of Kaufmann's essay would seem to suggest that for those seeking to address philosophical questions, much can be gained from reading Camus. Over the past half century, there has been sustained interest in the ethical, ontological, metaphysical, and aesthetic problems posed by Camus' novels, short stories, plays, and non-fiction writings. Camus, more than most accomplished novelists, enables his readers to bridge different genres of writing, thinking and being, linking the literary with the philosophical. For Hanna (1958), this 'interplay between the philosophical and literary concerns of Camus is largely responsible for the richness and value of his writings' (p. 35). Camus' reach into different fields has been equalled by few other writers of his generation. His work has been engaged by those concerned with politics (Cruickshank, 1960; LeBlanc, 2004; Woolfolk, 1984), psychology (Grobe, 1966), justice and human rights (Ford, 2004; Orme, 2007), colonialism and anti-colonialism (Vulor, 2000), film (Vines, 2003), and theology (Onimus, 1970; Skrimshire, 2006), among other domains. Camus' writings have also found comment from a number of educationists over the years (e.g., Curzon-Hobson, 2003; Denton, 1964; Gibbons and Heraud, 2007; Götz, 1987; Greene, 1973; Marshall, 2007a, 2007b; Oliver, 1973; Weddington, 2007).

Of Camus' literary works, *The Fall* (Camus, 2000) is perhaps the most significant for those seeking to bridge literary and philosophical genres. Brian Fitch (1995) sees *The Fall* as Camus' 'finest achievement as a writer' (p. 122). Avi Sagi (2002) agrees that this is 'one of the deepest and most beautiful of Camus's works' (p. 131). The philosopher Robert Solomon (2004) describes the book as a 'brilliant quasi-religious novel' (p. 41). Others, as Hustis (2007) observes, have often seen the book as 'an earnest, yet tongue-in-cheek, response to the scathingly personal criticisms leveled at the Nobel-prize-winning author by his one-time friend and compatriot Jean-Paul Sartre' (p. 1). *The Fall* was, in fact, Sartre's favourite book by Camus. When asked why this was so, Sartre said it was because 'Camus put himself and hid himself entirely in that work' (Todd, 2000, p. xx). My inclination, as this paper will elaborate, is with those who see *The Fall* as 'the most enigmatic of Camus' works' (Locke, 1967, p. 306). More than anything else, *The Fall* is characterised by ambiguity (Madden, 1966). Key early critics found the book complex, pessimistic and difficult to interpret (Hartsock, 1961, p. 357). Responses over subsequent decades have only added to the sense that this is a multi-layered work, demanding deep reflection on the part of the reader.

In the educational literature on Camus, little attention has been paid specifically to *The Fall*. This paper celebrates *The Fall's* difficulties, arguing that in the complexities and ambiguities of the novel lie educational opportunities. The open-endedness of *The Fall*, it will be suggested, invites a form of philosophical reflection that is – or *may* be – educative. The paper is structured in three parts. The first section provides a brief account of the origins, form and content of the book. This is followed by a closer examination of the last part of the novel, where the main character, Clamence, is shown to be at his most vulnerable and where his pedagogical method as a judge-penitent is described. The final section considers how Camus' distinctive blending of the literary with the philosophical prompts readers to reflect on themselves, their motivations and commitments, their relationships with others, and the very process of reflection itself.

The Fall: Genesis, Form and Content

The Fall grew out of a difficult period in Camus' life. When the book was published (as *La Chute*) in 1956, Camus was, as Olivier Todd (2000a, p. v) describes it, 'physically and psychologically exhausted' (p. v). He and Jean-Paul Sartre had had a very public falling out, the latter finding fault with Camus' political position in *The Rebel*. (For further details on the conflict between Sartre and Camus, see Todd, 2000b.) Camus regretted the loss of Sartre's intellectual friendship, and he found himself at odds with a number of others in French literary circles. Camus's stance on the Algerian conflict did not mesh comfortably with Sartre's Marxist analysis of French colonialism, and when an all-out war erupted in the mid-1950s he was filled with horror. Camus embraced a vaguely defined ideal of a 'Mediterranean civilization', believing that 'more than a hundred years after the conquest of Algeria, white settlers were entitled to live there, just as much as the Arabs and Kabyles were' (p. v). His left-wing French colleagues branded him a 'reactionary', proclaiming him a traitor for his anti-communism and his refusal to align himself with Algerian nationalists (p. x). At this time, Camus' marriage to Francine Faure was also in trouble, and he was suffering from writer's block. He was ill, with the effects of tiredness, depression and TB all taking their toll (p. viii). He felt burnt-out and wondered what he had really accomplished in his life to date. His response was to begin writing some short stories, and this is how *The Fall* was born.

Todd (2000a) notes that in his early twenties, Camus had planned his writing in terms of cycles, each cycle comprising a novel, a play and an essay. One cycle, the Absurd, included *The Outsider* (Camus, 1983), *Caligula* (Camus, 1962) and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1991), while another, Revolt, was made up of *The Plague* (Camus, 1968), several plays and *The Rebel* (Camus, 1953). *The First Man* (Camus, 1996), the incomplete novel not published in English until several decades after Camus' untimely death in 1960, was intended to form part of a happier cycle (p. xix). *The Fall* was not planned as part of one of these cycles. It came into being more by accident, growing from story length to something approaching a short novel, driven along by creative energies Camus' felt he had lost. Difficult circumstances and intellectual isolation had taken Camus to the depths of despair, but they also provided fertile inspiration – and subject matter – for the work rapidly unfolding. *The Fall* is, as Hanna (1958) puts it, 'the most personal of Camus' works', but in some ways it is also 'the least revealing' (p. 219). There is much of Camus in the book, but *The Fall* is also a portrait of Sartre and his comrades in the French intelligentsia of the 1950s. At the same time, the ideas conveyed in the book are not merely an amalgamation of the views held by Camus, Sartre and other Parisian intellectuals at the time. *The Fall* is a complement to *The Outsider*, but there are arguably also echoes of Camus' other works in the book.

The complexity of *The Fall* is evident not only in its content but in its form. *The Fall* defies easy description. Some have even been reluctant to call *The Fall* a novel. At around 100 pages, some prefer to see it as a novella, or as a semi-autobiographical confession, or as a work of philosophy. David Madden (1966) captures some of the problems for those seeking to categorise this work:

Only in the most liberal sense can Albert Camus' *The Fall* be called a novel. Camus himself never claimed it to be a novel as such. Although it has characteristics of the conventional novel, it is also similar in form and content to a long and personalized philosophical essay in the manner of Kierkegaard

or of Plato's dialogues, the interlocutor's questions merely implied. Seemingly a monologue, there are suggestions that it is more than a soliloquy. As an essay-novel, composed of anecdotes, epigrams, observations that include numerous ethical questions, poetic passages, and a faint story line, discernible in the progression of Jean-Baptiste's "spiritual" transformation, *The Fall* presents special problems of interpretation regarding form and meaning. (p. 461)

Despite these multiple layers, the book's structure is anything but haphazard. Camus was a master of lucid, concise, carefully constructed prose, and *The Fall* exhibits all of these characteristics. The development of a form appropriate for his purpose is what is at stake with *The Fall*. 'For a man with a philosophical attitude to express and illustrate', Madden suggests, 'it would seem that the freedom of the essay-novel form is congenial. But to this freedom Camus has brought the artist's restraint and control' (p. 461).

The central character and narrator in *The Fall* is Jean-Baptiste Clamence. The book is structured into a series of sections the length of short chapters, but without chapter numbers. There is little in the way of a traditional 'plot'. Over a five-day period, Clamence addresses an unknown interlocutor in and nearby an Amsterdam bar, the *Mexico City*. His addressee never speaks, yet is always present. The interlocutor's actions and words, few as they are, are always only implied by what Clamence has to say. In his narrative, Clamence reflects on his own successes and shortcomings, and also makes pronouncements on a wide range of philosophical themes. We learn that he worked as a lawyer in Paris, but that he is now living in the Dutch capital and has come to describe himself as a 'judge-penitent'. He is currently middle aged, with a long history of triumphant cases and personal conquests behind him. Clamence's discourse with the unnamed, unseen bar companion traverses a diverse philosophical territory, addressing ontological, ethical, political, and aesthetic topics. He speaks of truth and justice, dishonesty and deceit, crime and punishment, status and hierarchies, freedom and slavery, memory and forgetfulness, courtesy, charm, love, friendship, death, faith, guilt, and judgement – among other things. He describes his relationships with women and with other professionals and intellectuals. He outlines some of his actions on behalf of others, both within and outside his profession. He discourses at length on his likes and dislikes, his whims and passions, and his superiority over others.

Described in these terms, it might seem as if the book lacks coherence and structure; as if it were merely a drunken rant. This is not so. Clamence's style of speaking is seemingly spontaneous, yet there is also a surprising deliberateness in his soliloquising. Indeed, there are moments of lucid sobriety in what might be expected to be a hazy, alcohol sodden environment. There is a progressive logic, without this seeming in any way contrived or mechanical, to the content of his narration, and as the monologue unfolds and Clamence peels away different layers of himself and his past, both the invisible partner in dialogue and the reader are taken in closer and closer. The forms of address to the interlocutor become successively more intimate, moving from the polite but anonymous '*monsieur*' at the beginning, to '*mon cher compatriote*', and finally to '*cher ami*'. In reducing the gap between protagonist and addressee in this manner, there is a corresponding reduction in what we might call moral distance. As Marcus (2006) observes, by emphasising the similarities between himself and the addressee, Clamence's account can be seen by the addressee 'not only as the story of another but also as his own, thus reinforcing his curiosity to continue

listening' (p. 316). The ultimate addressee here is the *reader*. It is we readers who are invited in, who become not identical with Clamence but more understanding, perhaps more forgiving, of him. Clamence is *us*: not in the sense of standing for some universal 'type', but in displaying a kind of vulnerability that is shared by all, even if in very different ways. Clamence, by his own reckoning and as portrayed with artful skill by Camus, does not have a definitive 'essence' waiting to be found as the layers are peeled away; rather, if there is anything to be revealed, it is the importance of the act of revealing itself.

Camus went to some lengths to stress that he was not Clamence, asserting this in interviews and even including words to that effect on the back cover of one edition of the book (Todd, 2000a, p. xii). There are some obvious differences between the two men. Clamence is a bachelor; Camus was married. Clamence was not a member of the Resistance; Camus was. Clamence, having carved out his career in Paris, now resides in Amsterdam; Camus, while intimately familiar with Paris, spent only a few days in the Dutch city (p. xii). Yet, there are also similarities. Some of these are small details: Clamence loves sport and leaves his car doors unlocked, for example, as was the case with Camus (p. xii). At a deeper level, some shared psychological and personality traits can be identified: a certain self-assurance mixed with doubt, an easy charm around women, a sense of guilt for actions taken and not taken, a love of language, and a willingness to engage in the practice of self-criticism. There are other similarities: *The Fall* is, for both Clamence and Camus, a book about middle-age and the crises it brings. It is also a searching examination of the middle class. When comparing the concentric canals of Amsterdam to the circles of hell, Clamence adds: 'The middle-class hell, of course, peopled with bad dreams' (Camus, 2000, p. 13). Clamence is not simply a self-portrait of Camus, but neither does he *escape* from his creator: Camus inhabits Clamence in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, infusing his character with aspects of his own experience, his thoughts and feelings, while also granting him the freedom to 'argue back' against those thoughts and feelings.

Those familiar with Dostoevsky's work will be struck by the parallels between *The Fall* and *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky, 1994a). Dostoevsky was one of the most important influences on Camus' work, a point that has been noted by a number of critics (e.g., Natov, 1981; Trahan, 1966; Wasiolek, 1977). Camus acknowledged his debt to the great Russian novelist in a number of his non-fiction writings. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1991), for example, Camus makes reference to Ivan Karamazov from *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1991) and Kirilov from *The Possessed* (sometimes translated as *Demons*, Dostoevsky, 1994b) in addressing the theme of suicide. He also adapted the latter novel as a play. For Camus, Dostoevsky was a pivotal figure in contemplating the moral consequences of a Godless world. While Dostoevsky ultimately retained his Christian faith, he went to great lengths, particularly in *The Brothers Karamazov*, to consider contrary positions. It was Dostoevsky, together with Nietzsche, who prompted Camus and many others to ponder: if God is dead, does this mean all is permitted? Clamence encourages us to consider this question as well, albeit in a somewhat different way.

Both Clamence and Dostoevsky's Underground Man emerge as deeply complex moral beings. Clamence himself might argue against this, emphasising the apparent simplicity of his underlying impulses. He says at one point: 'I'd have given ten conversations with Einstein for a first meeting with a pretty chorus-girl' (Camus, 2000, p. 45). 'It's true', he concedes, 'that at the tenth meeting I was longing for Einstein or a serious book', and yet, he claims, 'I was never concerned with the major problems except in the intervals between my little excesses' (p. 45). Clamence

confesses to many of his faults, yet also hides others, and through the very act of confessing displays certain virtues. By his own admission and account of his actions he reveals himself to be a deceptive and manipulative man. He is egotistical, hypocritical, insincere, and selfish; and yet he is not without some redeeming features. He is polite, charming, articulate, and refreshingly frank. He is an acute observer of the human condition. He has been very successful in his profession. He is as ruthless in deconstructing himself as he is in critiquing others. Clamence, in short, leaves the reader unsure of what to make of him. There is one crucial incident, however, that has a bearing on everything else. The consequences of this incident become clearer in the last part of the book, as the next section shows.

Vulnerability, Judgement and Confessional Pedagogy

Near the end of the novel, Clamence displays a vulnerability that has been largely pushed aside by his earlier boastfulness and confidence. This vulnerability is not completely disguised earlier in the novel. Readers learn, about midway through the book, that Clamence has been haunted by a single incident from his past. While walking to the Left Bank and his home via the Pont Royal in Paris one evening, in light rain, he passes behind a young woman leaning over the railing of a bridge and seeming to stare into the river below. He hesitates for a moment, but then goes on. After crossing the bridge he walks a further fifty yards or so and then hears the sound of a body striking the water:

I stopped short but without turning round. Almost at once I heard a cry, repeated several times, which was going downstream; then it abruptly ceased. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable. I wanted to run and yet didn't move an inch. I was trembling, I believe from cold and shock. I told myself that I had to be quick and I felt an irresistible weakness steal over me. I have forgotten what I thought then. 'Too late, too far ...' or something of the sort. I was still listening as I stood motionless. Then, slowly, in the rain, I went away. I told no one. (pp. 52-53)

This event leaves its mark on the rest of the book. Clamence experiences what might be called moral dissonance, but underneath his overt charm and cynicism lies a seriousness, engendered by this one incident, he cannot hide. His efforts to cast himself as uncaring, frivolous, and lacking in conscience are never fully convincing, and in the last section of the book there is a marked shift in his tone and manner.

The last section is the only part of the book where the discussion takes place in Clamence's own home. Clamence is caught off-guard. His interlocutor turns up to find him, embarrassed, still in bed. 'It's nothing', Clamence offers, 'just a little fever that I'm treating with gin' (p. 88). The room is described as bare but clean. There are no books, Clamence having given up reading some time ago, disgusted with having a house full of half-read books. Having recovered his composure, Clamence recalls his wartime adventures, drawing attention in particular to his informal appointment to the role of 'Pope' among his comrades. His election was in response to the question: 'Who among us ... has the most failings?' (p. 92). Clamence, 'as a joke' raises his hand and is the only one to do so. Thus elected, he ends up taking the role seriously, discovering, with moral problems for which there is no simple answer, that it was not as easy as he had thought to be a Pope. As if to disrupt the reader's

trust in him, Clamence declares his uncertainty as to whether he actually lived these events or merely dreamed them. Regardless, from the experience he takes one ‘great idea’: ‘that one must forgive the Pope. To begin with, he needs it more than anyone else. Secondly, that’s the only way to set oneself above him ...’ (pp. 93-94).

After showing his companion a stolen painting he has in his possession (*The Just Judges*), Clamence approaches the climax of his five-day narration. This part of the novel is worth scrutinising in some detail. Clamence provides six reasons for not returning the painting, the last of which is that this allows everything to stay in harmony: justice is, once and for all, separated from innocence. This provides the basis for what Clamence now sees as his profession – that is, his vocation as a judge-penitent. His usual ‘offices’, he says, are at the *Mexico City*, but he practises well beyond this – ‘[e]ven in bed, even with a fever’ (p. 96). Indeed, ‘one doesn’t practise this profession, one breathes it constantly’ (p. 96). Clamence elaborates:

Don’t get the idea that I have talked to you at such length for five days just for the fun of it. No. I used to talk through my hat quite enough in the past. Now my words have a purpose. They have the purpose, obviously, of silencing the laughter, of avoiding judgement personally, though there is apparently no escape. Is not the great thing that stands in the way of our escaping it the fact that we are the first to condemn ourselves? Therefore it is essential to begin by extending the condemnation to all, without distinction, in order to thin it out at the start. (p. 96)

For Clamence, there should be ‘[n]o excuses ever, for anyone’. In philosophy as in politics, he says, ‘I am for any theory that refuses to grant man innocence and for any practice that treats him as guilty’ (pp. 96-97). Clamence is ‘an enlightened advocate of slavery’ (p. 97). Freedom, he has concluded, is too heavy a burden to bear. In a world where we are alone, without God, ‘the weight of days is dreadful’ (p. 98) and for Clamence this means one must choose a master. Our moral philosophers, Clamence asserts, are hypocrites. They reject Christianity but, unable to stop themselves from passing judgement, take up moralising instead. They don’t really want freedom or its judgements and, replacing Churches, they invent dreadful rules, avoiding the grace they truly seek – with its ‘acceptance, surrender, happiness’ (p. 99).

It was on the bridge that night in Paris that Clamence learned he too was afraid of freedom. We need masters, Clamence has come to believe, whoever they may be. It is essential ‘to cease being free and to obey, in repentance, a greater rogue than oneself. When we are all guilty, that will be democracy’ (p. 100). Giving away his own freedom, Clamence, through his work as a judge-penitent at the *Mexico City*, invites others to do the same. Noting, however, that his preferred solution of slavery is not immediately realisable, Clamence has had to find another means of extending judgement to everybody in order to make it weigh less heavily on his own shoulders. What he has discovered is this:

Inasmuch as one couldn’t condemn others without immediately judging oneself, one had to overwhelm oneself to have the right to judge others. Inasmuch as every judge some day ends up as a penitent, one has to travel the road in the opposite direction and practise the profession of penitent to be able to end up as a judge. (p. 101)

Clamence's approach to his profession of judge-penitent involves, first, 'indulging in public confession as often as possible. I accuse myself up hill and down dale.' (p. 102). This is not a crude exercise, but a process of skilful navigation, with distinctions and digressions as appropriate to each listener. Clamence goes further than this, mingling what concerns him with what concerns others, choosing features in common, experiences endured together, failings shared. 'With all that', he says, 'I construct a portrait which is the image of all and of no one', where people are led to wonder: 'Why, surely I've met him!' (p. 102). With the portrait complete, Clamence holds it out in great sorrow, declaring 'This, alas, is what I am!'. 'But at the same time the portrait I hold out to my contemporaries becomes a mirror' (p. 102). Clamence concludes:

Covered with ashes, tearing my hair, my face scored by clawing, but with piercing eyes, I stand before all humanity recapitulating my shames without losing sight of the effect I am producing and saying: 'I was the lowest of the low.' Then imperceptibly I pass from the 'I' to the 'we'. When I get to 'This is what we are', the game is over and I can tell them off. I am like them, to be sure; we are in the soup together. However, I have a superiority in that I know it and this gives me the right to speak. You see the advantage, I am sure. The more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you. Even better, I provoke you into judging yourself, and this relieves me of that much of the burden. (p. 103)

In this final section of the book, the interlocutor is also revealed more fully. Clamence sees him as 'a difficult client' (p. 103). Most of the others Clamence works with in his practice as a judge-penitent are more sentimental than intelligent. 'With the intelligent ones', he says, 'it takes time. It is enough to explain the method fully to them. They don't forget it; they reflect. Sooner or later, half as a game and half out of emotional upset, they give up and tell all' (p. 103). Clamence encourages his companion to revisit the *Mexico City* one day and to observe the details of his technique in action, promising: 'You will see me teaching them night after night that they are vile' (p. 104). In the last paragraph of the book, Clamence finally comes to the realisation that his interlocutor is, as he was, a lawyer practising in Paris. 'Are we not all alike', he asks, 'constantly talking and to no one, for ever up against the same questions although we know the answers in advance?' (p. 107). *The Fall* closes with these words:

Then tell me, please, what happened to you one night on the quays of the Seine and how you managed never to risk your life. You yourself utter the words that for years have never ceased echoing through my nights and that I shall at last say through your mouth: 'O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us! A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion! Just suppose, *cher maître*, that we should be taken literally? We'd have to go through with it. Brr ...! The water's so cold! But let's not worry! It's too late now. It'll always be too late. Fortunately! (pp. 107-108)

Literature, Philosophy and Reflection

By Clamence's own account, his work as a judge-penitent is pedagogical in nature: he is involved in teaching others to examine themselves critically. Like any other teacher, he has a range of methods at his disposal, but he adapts them to suit different people and contexts. His 'classroom' is the *Mexico City* and surrounding areas. Yet, this is by no means the only way in which the book can be read from an educational point of view. We can also ask 'What does Camus teach us?' and 'How does he do this?' What does the form of *The Fall* allow, from an educational point of view, that (say) a philosophy text might not?

Camus did not see *The Fall* as a work of philosophy, and were we to evaluate it in those terms, it would not be difficult to identify weaknesses. Key propositions, as enunciated by Clamence, are often left to stand on their own without robust philosophical argument. The ideas are not developed in a tight sequential, logical fashion. *The Fall* is aphoristic in its treatment of philosophical themes, recalling the style adopted most famously by Nietzsche in several of his major works. Clamence offers numerous brief, insightful remarks and observations and leaves it to readers to ponder their further significance. *The Fall* teaches through fostering a particular kind of reflection in those who engage the text. The novel is, as Brian Fitch (1995) points out, designed to *unsettle* – indeed, *disturb* – the reader. It is not, Fitch argues, a book one can simply lay down after having read it and walk away from; it has 'both an immediate and lasting impact upon its reader, who cannot emerge unscathed from the experience' (p. 120). 'It is not until its very last pages', Fitch adds, 'that the full import of its title is brought home to us and that we come to realize that its aim has been nothing less than to engineer the "fall" of its reader' (p. 120). The reader, like Clamence's listeners in the *Mexico City*, becomes one of the judge-penitent's students. Camus thus teaches us to reconsider our own 'innocence'; to ask searching questions of ourselves as we sit in judgement of Clamence.

Of course, this kind of interrogation of ourselves is also possible through a standard work of philosophy. Strong arguments, with conclusions that follow logically from well defended premises, can convince us to rethink fundamental ideas and, through this, to undergo a process of educational transformation. But the form of a work such as *The Fall* can have an important bearing on the extent to which, and the way in which, this process occurs. For *The Fall* is not merely about philosophical ideas in the abstract; it is about their embodiment in the life, words and actions of a central character, Jean-Baptiste Clamence. This allows us to see those ideas in a fresh light: to consider them in relation to their contexts (even if those contexts may be described in only vague terms in parts of the novel), and to recognise their imperfections, their tensions and contradictions, as well as their power and insight. They become not so much 'lived' ideas as 'live' ideas – subject to the ebb and flow of events, distractions and interruptions, questions and comments from others, the pull of strong emotions, and the shifting consciousness of the central character.

One of Camus' great achievements with the novel is to make it difficult for readers to 'pigeon hole' Clamence. Clamence is a complex character, but not in a contrived way. He is, as Nietzsche (1996) would have put it, 'human, all too human'. Throughout much of the book, he displays a certain self-assurance – an arrogance borne out of his success as a lawyer and the control he feels over others. He is open about his desire to dominate – his need to be 'above' others, even in a literal sense (preferring, for example, to be on the upper deck of boats and to take the bus instead of the underground). He notes that he never had difficulty in attracting women, and

he outlines in some detail the ways in which he would manipulate his relationships with them. In the last part of the book, this veil of control begins to slip away, and Clamence, more ‘exposed’ at this point than at any other stage of the narrative, over-compensates. He lets himself get carried away by emotion, insisting, as if defending himself when no charge has yet been laid, ‘I am happy, I tell you. I won’t let you think I’m not happy, I am happy unto death!’ (Camus, 2000, p. 105). He continues: ‘I’m going back to bed; forgive me. I fear I got worked up; yet I’m not weeping’ (p. 105).

Clamence has done much throughout the book to try and convince his interlocutor – and the reader – that he doesn’t care for others, at least not in a genuine way. He notes early on that he liked to help blind people cross the street and defend ‘widows and orphans’ in court, but this, his narrative seems to suggest, is all for show. In the last section, with his guard beginning to fall down, he reasserts his selfishness. Just at the point where the reader might start believing his pedagogical work as a judge-penitent is more for the good of others than for himself, he says to his companion of the past five days: ‘Admit ... that today you feel less pleased with yourself than you felt five days ago? Now I shall wait for you to write to me or to come back. For you will come back, I am sure! You’ll find me unchanged. And why should I change, since I have found the happiness that suits me?’ (p. 103). In case there was any doubt about his self-centredness, he adds: ‘I haven’t changed my way of life; I continue to love myself and to make use of others’ (p. 104). Clamence, we might be quick to say, does not redeem himself; he remains egotistical, manipulative and hypocritical. In teaching others to examine themselves critically he seems to be driven less by a sense of care and respect for his learners, or for the good he might bring to their lives, than by the sense of personal satisfaction he gains from seeing people eventually break down and confess all.

Yet, the discomforting effect of Camus’ work is that as readers reach the end of the book, the forms of judgement we might be tempted to pass on Clamence need, in turn, to be passed on us. We are all guilty, as Clamence says. Camus, through the character and words of Clamence, teaches us to reflect, but in the end we end up questioning not only ourselves – our motivations, our commitments, our relations with others – but the very process of reflection itself. As Solomon (2004) observes, Camus maintained an ambivalent attitude toward questions of innocence and reflection. His writings – not just *The Fall* but *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and his lyrical essays and notebooks as well – encourage us to ask:

How philosophical can one be without falling into the gloom to which philosophy is so prone? “I tried philosophy”, noted Doctor Johnson, “but cheerfulness kept breaking out”. To what extent can one live the life of reflection which, contra Aristotle, both Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky likened to a kind of disease? Does reflection inevitably lead to a sense of one’s own inadequacy? (p. 52)

The notion of ‘reflection’ has occupied an important place in educational discourse over the years. The idea of a ‘liberal education’ is often promoted on the basis that it will encourage students to become reflective citizens; there has been a great deal of talk about the need to develop teachers who are ‘reflective practitioners’; and reflection is a key element in the pedagogical theory of the influential Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire. Many who address questions of spirituality in education also stress the value of reflection. *The Fall* unsettles us here: it prompts us to examine

afresh our cherished assumptions about the worth of a reflective life. Yet in doing so, it provides tacit affirmation of the importance of reflection: it is, paradoxically, *through* reflection that we come to question the value of reflection. In both its form and its content, *The Fall*, once taken up by readers, becomes, as it were, complicit in this process.

Clamence himself is a reflective man, but only to a point. He seems to accept, if not relish, the fact that he forgets many things and that most events in his life leave few permanent marks on him. He undergoes a thorough process of confession, and encourages those he teaches through his role as judge penitent to do likewise, yet his confession does not reveal all. We learn from Clamence's actions, from the way he talks, as much as from what he says. *The Fall* does not provide prominent signposts for the reader in this process, but subtle hints are there. The movements within and beyond the *Mexico City* earlier in the book; the shift in tone as Clamence discusses the one event that seems to have left a lasting imprint on his moral life; and the more openly emotional quality of the narration in the last section: these all provide important contextual clues in deciding how to interpret the ideas presented to us.

The very fact that Clamence monopolises the conversation to such an extent – one commentator has called *The Fall* a ‘dialogue of one’ (Hartsock, 1961, p. 358) – tells us something significant about the relationship between the ideas and the man. Clamence, as we have seen, likes to dominate, to be in control. While implying that his teaching method involves listening as well as talking, we cannot know what this means in practice. Does he listen carefully to those he teaches when they reach the point of pouring their hearts out, displaying the patience his interlocutor has shown with his (Clamence’s) confession over the past five days? At one point in the final section he seems to answer this question, saying ‘I shall listen ... to your own confession with a great feeling of fraternity’ (p. 103). But we cannot be sure what this will mean in practice, for the narrative finishes before we have time to find out. On the evidence presented in the text, Clamence seems to lack the kind of deep concern for the voice of ‘the Other’ that is often seen as necessary for authentic educational dialogue. This too, however, remains uncertain. With only one side of what could be a reciprocal conversational arrangement presented to us, and only Clamence’s brief sketch of his pedagogical method to go by, there remains considerable ambiguity about the form of dialogue being promoted.

Camus leaves no neat and easy ‘answers’ in *The Fall*. The value of Clamence’s pedagogical approach as a judge-penitent remains unclear. We know that Clamence sees advantages in the process for himself – ‘I provoke you into judging yourself’, he says, ‘and this relieves me of that much of the burden’ (p. 103) – but the question of whether reflection through confession is worthwhile for others finds no definitive resolution. Reflection certainly does not seem to lead unequivocally to happiness; if anything, there is greater emphasis on the sense of despair it may provoke. At most, Clamence seems to suggest, we develop a more honest understanding of our shortcomings. ‘Ah *mon cher*’, he says to his companion, ‘we are odd, wretched creatures and, if we merely look back over our lives, there’s no lack of occasions to amaze and scandalize ourselves’ (p. 103). Solomon (2004) suggests that Clamence and perhaps Camus may have indulged in the wrong kind of reflection, ‘reflection that was already tainted with the other-worldly, with comparisons and contrasts to perfection, and consequently with the seeds of failure and resentment’ (p. 53).

This is the cost of what Nietzsche called the “shadows of God”: our continuing insistence to hold up superhuman ideals of perfection and then declare ourselves failures or frauds in their reflection. Thus the comparison and contrast with a perfect world makes this one seem “absurd”, and the comparison and contrast with either God or Christ or the *Übermensch* renders us pathetic, “human-all-too-human”. (p. 53)

Solomon may be right in this assessment, but *The Fall* also calls these ‘shadows of God’ into question. Moreover, it is not merely the process of individual reflection that is at stake here, but the form of reflection established through a pedagogical relation. The reflection Clamence undergoes may not be the same as that experienced by his ‘students’, or, for that matter, by the reader. Nor should we take it for granted that despair is always ethically undesirable or to be avoided. (There is no suggestion here that Solomon assumes as much.) There may be educative value in the forms of despair promoted by Clamence’s pedagogical method. Camus does not tell us the answer here, and we can only draw, at most, partial inferences about this from the ‘results’ presented to us by Jean-Baptiste Clamence. In the end, ambiguity and uncertainty prevail, but with them *possibilities* also emerge, and the reader is left to continue ‘working’ with the text long after the reading process has seemingly been completed.

Conclusion

Whatever our judgement of Camus as a philosopher, it is undeniable, I think, that works such as *The Fall* allow us to ponder important philosophical questions. *The Fall* provides a convincing demonstration of Camus’ ability to bridge different genres of writing: to allow the literary to *become* philosophical via the forms of reflection engendered in the reader. Indeed, it can be claimed that *The Fall* transforms the reader-text relationship. This is the position taken by Brian Fitch (1995), who maintains that in *The Fall* Camus has developed a narrative form that is unique in the manner of its interaction with the reader. It is not simply a case of the reader becoming more like the novelist (as the French *Nouveau Roman* encouraged); rather, ‘*The Fall*’s reader becomes implicated in the reading on an existential level, as a human being with a past, present, and future that have nothing to do with aesthetics and everything to do with life as it is led’ (p. 121). This paper has concentrated on one aspect of life as it is led: the educational dimension, to which Camus, through the character and ideas of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, has something important to contribute. That readers at the end of the novel are left with further questions about exactly what this might be confirms rather than denies the value of the book. *The Fall* teaches us, whether we want to learn this or not, to continue the process of reflection already started by Clamence. This is, then, not a book one should pick up lightly: a decision to read *The Fall* is simultaneously a decision to risk upsetting and changing forever our view of ourselves, others and the nature of our ethical lives.

References

- Camus, A. (1953) *The Rebel*, trans. A. Bower (London, Hamish Hamilton).
- Camus, A. (1960) *The Plague*, trans. S. Gilbert (London, Penguin).
- Camus, A. (1962) *Caligula and Three Other Plays* (New York, Vintage).
- Camus, A. (1983) *The Outsider*, trans. J. Laredo (London, Penguin).
- Camus, A. (1991) *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. J. O'Brien (New York, Vintage International).
- Camus, A. (1996) *The First Man*, trans. D. Hapgood (London, Penguin).
- Camus, A. (2000) *The Fall*, trans. J. O'Brien (London, Penguin).
- Cruickshank, J. (1960) *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (New York, Oxford University Press).
- Curzon-Hobson, A. (2003) Between exile and the kingdom: Albert Camus and empowering classroom relationships, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 35 (4), pp. 367-380.
- Denton, D.E. (1964) Albert Camus: philosopher of moral concern, *Educational Theory*, 14, pp. 99-127.
- Dostoevsky, F. (1991) *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. R. Pevear & L. Volokhonsky (New York, Vintage).
- Dostoevsky, F. (1994a) *Notes from Underground*, trans. R. Pevear & L. Volokhonsky (New York, Vintage).
- Dostoevsky, F. (1994b) *Demons*, trans. R. Pevear & L. Volokhonsky (New York, Vintage).
- Fitch, B.T. (1995) *The Fall: A Matter of Guilt* (New York, Twayne Publishers).
- Ford, R. (2004) Critiquing desire: philosophy, writing and terror, *Journal of Human Rights*, 3 (1), pp. 85-98.
- Gibbons, A. & Heraud, R. (2007) Creativity, enterprise and the absurd: education and the Myth of Sisyphus – a challenge to an educator, paper presented at the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia conference, Wellington, 6-9 December.
- Götz, I.L. (1987) Camus and the art of teaching, *Educational Theory*, 37 (3), pp. 265-276.
- Greene, M. (1973) *Teacher as Stranger* (Belmont, CA, Wadsworth).
- Hanna, T. (1958) *The Thought and Art of Albert Camus* (Chicago, Henry Regnery).
- Hartstock, M. (1961) Camus' *The Fall*: dialogue of one, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 7 (4), pp. 357-364.
- Hustis, H. (2007) Falling for Dante: The *Inferno* in Albert Camus's *La Chute*, *Mosaic*, 40 (4), 1-16.
- Kaufmann, W. (1959) Existentialism and death, *Chicago Review*, 13 (2), pp. 75-93.
- LeBlanc, J.R. (2004) *Ethics and Creativity in the Political Thought of Simone Weil and Albert Camus* (Lewiston, NY, The Edwin Mellen Press).
- Locke, F.W. (1967) The metamorphoses of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, *Symposium*, 21 (4), pp. 306-315.
- Madden, D. (1966) Ambiguity in Albert Camus' *The Fall*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 12 (4), pp. 461-472.
- Marcus, A. (2006) Camus's *The Fall*: the dynamics of narrative unreliability, *Style*, 40 (4), pp. 314-333.
- Marshall, J.D. (2007a) Philosophy, polemics, education, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 26, pp. 97-109.

- Marshall, J.D. (2007b) Philosophy as literature, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 39, pp. 1-11.
- Matthews, J.H. (1964) From *The Stranger* to *The Fall*: confession and complicity, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 10 (3), pp. 265-273.
- Natov, N. (1981) Albert Camus' attitude towards Dostoevsky, *Revue de Litterature Compare*, 55 (3/4), pp. 439-464.
- Nietzsche, F. (1996) *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press). (Original work published 1878)
- Oliver, T. (1973) Camus, man, and education, *Educational Theory*, 23 (3), pp. 224-229.
- Onimus, J. (1970) *Albert Camus and Christianity*, trans. E. Parker (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan).
- Orme, M. (2007) *The Development of Albert Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice: "Justice Pour Un Juste"* (Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press).
- Sagi, A. (2002) *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, trans. B. Stein (Amsterdam, Rodopi).
- Skrimshire, S. (2006) A political theology of the absurd? Albert Camus and Simone Weil on social transformation, *Literature and Theology*, 20 (3), pp. 286-300.
- Solomon, R.C. (2004) Pathologies of pride in Camus's *The Fall*, *Philosophy and Literature*, 28, pp. 41-59.
- Todd, O. (2000a) Introduction, in A. Camus *The Fall*, trans. J. O'Brien (London, Penguin).
- Todd, O. (2000b) *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. B. Ivry (New York, Carroll & Graf).
- Trahan, E. (1966) Clamence vs. Dostoevsky: an approach to *La Chute*, *Comparative Literature*, 18 (4), pp. 337-350.
- Vines, L. (2003) Kieslowski's *Red* and Camus's *The Fall*: redemption of a judge-penitent, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 31 (2), pp. 141-147.
- Vulor, E.C. (2000) *Colonial and Anti-Colonial Discourses: Albert Camus and Algeria* (Lanham, MD, University Press of America).
- Wasiolek, E. (1977) Dostoevsky, Camus, and Faulkner: transcendence and mutilation, *Philosophy and Literature*, 1 (2), pp. 131-146.
- Weddington, H.S. (2007) The education of Sisyphus: absurdity, educative transformation, and suicide, *Journal of Transformative Education*, 5 (2), pp. 119-133.
- Woolfolk, A. (1984) The dangers of engagement: Camus' political esthetics, *Mosaic*, 17 (3), pp. 59-69.