



Neuroexistentialism: Camus' *La Chute*

French Cultural Studies

1–11

© The Author(s) 2025



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/09571558251406512

journals.sagepub.com/home/frcDavid Philip Platten 

Abstract

Although Camus's *La Chute* (1956) is not a popular choice, even among some Camus specialists, Margaret Attack considered it to be one of the finest works of modern French literature. This complex novella is the story of a man purporting to evaluate his own life. As such, it privileges modes of cognition, yet readers are often frustrated as they wrestle with a text in which the usual modalities through which a human life is given substance are undermined. Recent developments in neuroscience allow for a more precise understanding of how individuals make sense of the past and of what determines their choices and actions. This article will draw on Gazzaniga's notion of 'the interpreter of experience' (2018) and Smith Churchland's work on altruism genes (2011) to shed new light on the presentation of self, and on the legacy of trauma, in *La Chute*.

Keywords

Camus, *La Chute*, neuroscience, autobiography, cognition, intertextuality, ethics

In her monograph, *Literature and the French Resistance. Cultural Politics and Narrative Forms*, Margaret Attack swept away the clichés that propped up politically expedient representations of the Occupation and set about reappraising the history of that period, by funnelling it through the literature associated with it. Her scrutiny of an extensive corpus, including the epochal existentialist novels, Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Sang des autres* (1945) and Albert Camus's *La Peste* (1947), led her to see the Occupation as a laboratory of human behaviours. 'The social and political chaos of the Occupation and its aftermath', she writes, 'is often echoing that of the world, or is shown to have universal implications for the nature of human endeavour...' (p. 212). In her analysis of *La Peste*, Attack argues that the black marketeer Cottard embodies the slipperiness and contingency of human relations and affiliations to such a degree that, by the end of the novel, he comes close to occupying the position of scapegoat. She advises that if readers want to see more clearly how 'by individualizing the violence and producing one guilty man, it is possible ... to give the rest

Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures, French Department, University of Leeds, Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK

Corresponding author:

David Philip Platten, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures, French Department, University of Leeds, LCS, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS2 9JT, UK.

Email: d.p.platten@leeds.ac.uk

a good conscience', they could do worse than consult 'the Camus of *La Chute*' (p. 212). My aim here is to pick up this hanging thread and explore the literary self-portrait of a human life presented in *La Chute*, and I shall do so by seeking help from research in the field of neuroscience, which questions how the human brain structures existence.

Over the last decade of the twentieth century, knowledge of human brain function expanded markedly thanks to improvements in the technology of brain imaging, leading to discoveries that have interested scholars in the humanities. In 1991, experiments conducted on macaque monkeys, whose brains are genetically close to those of humans, revealed the existence of mirror neurons. When one monkey reacted to stimulation, an onlooking monkey in a separate compartment experienced identical brain activity (Iacoboni). This narrowing of the gap between experience and perception underscores the existence of deep cognitive and emotional connections between the macaques, and thus by inference, between human beings. If we humans do possess such intricate empathic circuitry, and subsequent research involving human subjects suggests that we do, this may affect not only how we relate to others in our daily lives but also how we respond to fictional scenarios in novels, and thus it may steer, albeit subconsciously, our responses to narrative fiction. Further advances in neuroscience have also allowed for a more precise understanding of how individuals make sense of the past and of what determines their choices and actions, so much so that philosophers Gregg D Caruso and Owen Flanagan have coined the term 'neuroexistentialism', which they frame as a new paradigm for thinking about the human condition.

Caruso and Flanagan define 'neuroexistentialism' as a third existentialist wave, the first being the challenge to ecclesiastical authority posed by Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, and the second the response to the cataclysm of industrial warfare and holocaust associated with the thought of Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus. Neuroexistentialism seeks to nail down the neo-Darwinist assumption that humans are incontrovertibly animals by bringing 'the needle-point of detail to the picture of persons anticipated by and accepted in the physicalist or naturalist view of things' (Caruso and Flanagan, 4). At the same time, it acknowledges that the consequences of such an affirmation – that the mind is the brain and that there is no such thing as a soul – would shatter entrenched belief systems and potentially cause widespread distress not only to faith communities but to many with a more spiritual sense of their own existence. Paradoxically, therefore, through the provision of evidence grounding a clear, rational understanding of who and what we are, this science of the brain will create 'the same feeling of drift and anchorless search for meaning that is a hallmark of all existentialisms' (Caruso and Flanagan, 5).

Such existential despair pervades the text of Camus's *La Chute*, cloaking the reader as surely as the fog that descends on the Zuyderzee (III, 700), the former large inlet of the North Sea in the north-west of the Netherlands, synonymous in the text with a state of rudderless drift. The mist and fog are profoundly disorientating and thus an apt metaphor for the difficulties posed by the text; Maurice Blanchot wrote that, when reading *La Chute*, he was confronted with a 'rhetoric of dizziness' (Ellison, 331). Still, the chapters comprising Caruso's and Flanagan's edition are drawn from a broad spectrum of academic endeavour, so, in attempting to penetrate the fog, and (eventually) reconnect with the more life-affirming aspects of Camus's oeuvre, I shall draw on two optimistic pieces in the collection: Michael S. Gazzaniga's notion of 'the interpreter of experience', and Patricia Smith Churchland's work on altruism genes.

Absence and obsolescence

Written in the first person, *La Chute* is a narration rather than a narrative, evoking a scenario in which the protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, regales an unnamed, shadowy interlocutor with

his life story, in the form of haphazard reminiscences interspersed with commentary on the events as they are being recalled. The encounter takes place in Mexico City, a bar in Amsterdam; it is, as one early critic remarks, 'a dialogue of one' (Hartsock, 358). As narration rather than narrative, it is bereft of that sense of being-in-the-world, those moments of communion with nature and other human beings that punctuate Camus's work and redeem the absurdities of existence. His admirers often point to these ecstatic moments of sensualist connection in his writing, when the body becomes the 'key mediation between the self and the world' (Deranty, 517). The prose poem *Noces* privileges what Philip Davis, writing on DH Lawrence, describes as 'multiple shifts to a passionate, heliotropic feeling-language' (Levine, 199). Alighting one summer's day in the coastal village of Tipaza, the senses of the protagonist and his companion are suffused with colour and fragrance: 'Nous entrons dans un monde jaune et bleu où nous accueille le soupir odorant et âcre de la terre d'été en Algérie' (I, 105). When, in *La Peste*, Rieux and Tarrou go swimming, the ocean breathes – 'Les eaux se gonflaient et redescendaient lentement' (II, 212) – and, for a few brief moments, the two night swimmers are liberated from the frenzied dying of the plague-world and re-enter the world of the living: 'Rieux se mit sur le dos et se tint immobile, face au ciel renversé, plein de lune et d'étoiles. Il respira longuement' (II, 212). And, towards the end of *L'Étranger*, we find Meursault, harangued by the prison chaplain who claims that sooner or later every condemned man sees an image of the divine in the damp stone walls of his cell. Meursault retorts that, in the months he has spent staring at the walls, the one face he may have sought would be that of his girlfriend Marie, exuding 'la couleur du soleil et la flamme du désir' (I, 210). This unexpected burst of passion, which precedes the eviction of the chaplain, prefaces Meursault's much-postponed reintegration with the natural world:

Je crois que j'ai dormi parce que je me suis réveillé avec des étoiles sur le visage. Des bruits de campagne montaient jusqu'à moi. Des odeurs de nuit, de terre et de sel rafraîchissaient mes tempes. La merveilleuse paix de cet été endormi entraînait en moi comme une marée. (I, 212)

There are no such moments of rapture in *La Chute*. Instead, their absence is prefigured by the empty space on the wall of the bar in Amsterdam, where a painting once hung. Towards the end of the novella, it is revealed that the painting is in the possession of Clamence. Camus here reprises one of the more famous thefts in art history. On 10 April 1934, two panels of 'The Ghent Altarpiece', a huge fifteenth-century canvas attributed to the Van Eyck brothers, were stolen from St Bavo Cathedral in Ghent. One of the panels depicting John the Baptist was later returned by the thief, as a gesture of good will, but the other, 'Les Juges intègres', was never found and had to be replaced by a copy.

One plausible reading of *La Chute* sees it as a self-reflexive, parodic summation, in which a barrister puts the case for his own existence. Nowhere is the artifice of the lawyer's performance more evident than in the section where Clamence explains why he hasn't returned the painting. He numbers the five reasons, as he would do if responding to the questions of the 'magistrat instructeur' (III, 756), and they are specious. In elaborating on the fifth, he muses on the significance of the panel and its positioning in *The Ghent Altarpiece*. Should the judges be there in the first place? Why are representatives of secular justice included in this absolute evocation of celestial authority? Are the judges 'vested in divine authority as well as civil' (Wheeler, 360), or profane interlopers in a sacred world? For Clamence, the debate is immaterial since, he asserts, we live in a post-Christian world, and he Clamence, who, to this point, has been engaged in a forlorn quest to expiate his guilt, has free rein to 'travailler selon mes convictions' (III, 757). His work, the atheist's protest, amounts to no more than petty theft. The original panel of 'Les Juges intègres', one minor element of a spectacular cosmos,

will remain in his apartment, both a keepsake of a miserable existence and a metonym of absence and loss. Camus was an atheist because, as he explains in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, he was unable to reconcile faith with the absurdity of human existence: 'L'absurde, qui est l'état métaphysique de l'homme conscient, ne mène pas à Dieu' (I, 62). However, once an avid student of Augustine, he also recognized the importance to western thought and culture of Christianity, in all its polyvalence. When Clamence confesses that he vandalized *The Ghent Altarpiece*, he arrogates to himself the right to banish from his life and from the lives of others the experience of viewing 'the greatest painting of fifteenth-century christendom' (Wheeler, 346) in its entirety. The centrepiece and largest section of *The Ghent Altarpiece* is the 'Adoration of the Mystic Lamb', in which the lamb standing on its altar is framed by verdant meadows and bushes. The red and brown cloaks of the congregation are towards the front, the spires of Jerusalem in the background, and the fountain of life in the extreme foreground. The entire scene radiates luminosity, an effect achieved by Jan Van Eyck's innovative varnishing of the oil paint with a transparent glaze. The result is a 'magnificent display of unequalled colour' (Dhanens, 106), a life-enhancing feast for the senses of a kind that occurs elsewhere in the Camus oeuvre but is rendered obsolete by the protagonist of *La Chute*.

(Self-) censorship

La Chute was published in 1956. It was originally destined for a collection of short stories, *L'Exil et le Royaume*, which came out the following year, but Camus developed it into what he called 'un récit', or novella. One of the stories in *L'Exil et le Royaume* deviates from his customary prose style, just as *La Chute* does, though in a more radical manner. 'Le Rénégat ou Un esprit confus' is a tale which cannot be told, for its teller is a missionary whose tongue has been cut out by those whom he was intending to convert. It is possible to deduce from this internal monologue that the experience of torture, and participation in elaborate ritual, has converted the missionary, who rails against the slave-masters of 'la sale Europe' (IV, 20). However, his mind is confused. Just as he once worshipped the Christian god, he is now subjugated to 'le fétiche', the god of the indigenous people. He has been terrorized not once but twice, his existence ruled by 'the madness of absolutes' (Carroll, 131).

The leitmotiv in 'Le Rénégat ou Un esprit confus' of 'la bouillie', the 'mush' of indecipherable words exiting the mutilated mouth as well as the image-thoughts percolating in the brain of the missionary, may suggest that Camus was not only in a troubled state of mind when he wrote it, but felt unable to speak out. Wounded by the rift with Sartre and his acolytes following his critique of messianic socialism in *L'Homme révolté*, and with war looming in Algeria, he found himself on the horns of a dilemma: this life-long combatant of fascism and colonialism was being repeatedly asked to take sides against family and friends marooned in the white, working-class enclaves of the pied-noir community in Algiers. On 22 January 1956, he addressed a mixed gathering of Muslims and French Algerians, including many influential public figures in Algiers, at the Cercle du Progrès, a building on the lower edge of the Casbah. Security for the event inside the hall was provided by armed FLN (Front de libération national) representatives. Outside, a mob of Far-Right settlers chanted 'Camus au Poteau!' While pebbles clattered against the windowpanes, Camus, speaking in lyrical tones that evoked common values beyond ideological division, appealed for a civilian truce. The full text of his speech, 'Pour une trêve civile', was published in Algiers shortly afterwards, though precautions were taken; for example, the name of the printer was smudged, as protection against reprisal (Lottman, 575). In any event, Camus's words were not heeded. It has since been suggested that he was manipulated by the FLN, principally through the person of Amar Ouzegane, his former ally in the PCA (Parti communiste algérien), since the nationalist movement

was by then on a war footing, preparing for the terror campaign to come. A year later, in February 1957, he announced his intention to withdraw from public debate on Algeria. This is the context in which *La Chute* was written. As he chiselled away at this narrative of desperate self-validation, one of the most influential post-war thinkers in France was experiencing his own fall from grace.

Given Clamence's reverence for theatre and football, his reflections on justice, and heartless womanizing, it is tempting to read *La Chute* as a coded autobiography. Michel Onfray gauges the extent to which Clamence's protestations and self-recriminations are freighted with the anxiety and depression provoked by the attacks on Camus's work by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and others, feelings exacerbated by the illness of his wife, Francine, who, in the last days of 1953, may have attempted to take her own life by jumping from a first-floor window. In the novella, Clamence imagines that he is condemned to 'vivre dans le malconfort' (III, 747), imprisoned by the judgements of others in a medieval cell, the dimensions of which prohibit the incarcerated person from standing up straight or lying prone: 'Tous les jours, par l'immuable contrainte qui ankylosait son corps, le condamné apprenait qu'il était coupable et que l'innocence consistait à s'étirer joyeusement' (III, 747). Or he stands immobilized in an open-topped, concrete shell, 'la cellule des crachats', face exposed to the spittle of the passing jailors. Onfray argues that these dual metaphors externalize a state of anguish that enveloped Camus in the early-to-mid-1950s, 'le double tourment d'un Camus confronté à la tentative de suicide de sa femme et au déchaînement de l'intelligentsia parisienne contre lui. Douleur privée ; douleur publique' (Onfray, 654).

Critics of Camus have often sought to extrapolate his views from the actions and words of the main protagonists in his fiction. *La Chute*, however, exploits the many subtle differentiations between character, narrator and author. The thought experiments conducted by Pierre Bayard in *Aurais-je été résistant ou bourreau?* Offer an interesting parallel. Inspired by the life story of his own father, Bayard explores how he himself might have reacted, were he pitched into a variety of scenarios, some real some fictional, connected with the Occupation, the Holocaust and its aftermath. In order to do this he creates a simulation of the self, 'un personnage délégué', who wears the shoes of various protagonists: those of the eponymous hero of Louis Malle's film *Lacombe, Lucien*; of a participant in Stanley Milgram's famous experiments of the early 1960s, which appeared to demonstrate that most people would not intervene to prevent the torture, even death, of other human beings if they believed that this suffering was officially sanctioned; of a German officer applying the principle that an individual soldier would not be required to take part in a firing squad against his wish; of one of 'les justes' of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, the mainly Huguenot villagers who sheltered thousands of Jewish children; and of the novelist Romain Gary, an accidental hero of the French Resistance. By activating a character close but not identical to himself, then imagining that character as someone else, Bayard rekindles each of these narratives in the hope of gaining access to 'ce point mystérieux au cœur de nous-mêmes où se prennent les décisions qui conduisent l'être-humain' (p. 16), to better understand why and how important, life-changing decisions are made.

We might think of Clamence as Camus's 'personnage-délégué'. However, the distance between them is far greater than that between Bayard and his projection of the self, and this is evident from the way in which Clamence addresses the reader. He boasts of having led an impeccable life, speaking of himself, in the third person, as a perfect citizen:

... un homme dans la force de l'âge, de parfaite santé, généreusement doué, habile dans les exercices du corps comme dans ceux de l'intelligence, ni pauvre ni riche, dormant bien, et profondément content de lui-même sans le montrer autrement que par une sociabilité heureuse. Vous admettez alors que je puisse parler, en toute modestie, d'une vie réussie'. (III, 708–709)

This vainglorious eructation, puffed up with comic hyperbole – ‘je prenais plaisir à la vie et à ma propre excellence’ (III, 707) – occludes the social critique also contained within these opening pages. Clamence is more than happy to take the place he claims to merit in a social hierarchy, ‘sur les cimes ... bien au-dessus des fourmis humaines’ (III, 707); however, a few pages earlier, he compares the ageless wisdom of the bartender (‘cet air de gravité ombrageuse, comme s’il avait le soupçon, au moins, que quelque chose ne tourne pas rond entre les hommes’ (III, 698)) with ‘les deux fureurs’, the two obsessions of his ‘concitoyens’, the sophisticated intellectual set in Paris: ‘Je rêve parfois de ce que diront de nous les historiens futurs. Une phrase leur suffira pour l’homme moderne : il forniquait et lisait des journaux’ (III, 699). To this list of two – fornication and ideas – early Camus critic and former war veteran Carl Viggiani adds a third: the desire to dominate others. Clamence, he argues, falls victim to ‘three kinds of lust ... *libido sentiendi*, *libido sciendi*, *libido dominandi*’ (Viggiani, 66).

Clamence’s blovations distance him from the character of the author, whose watchword was ‘la mesure’, the insistence on proportionality that governed rhetorical debate in Ancient Greece, which is sometimes rendered in English by the word ‘restraint’. They may also contain elements of satire, at the expense of some of Camus’s detractors, but these are encrypted. More poignantly, the hyperbole and self-contradiction are also indicative of a babbling man, struggling to articulate what he wants to communicate, whose tongue will soon be tied, if not completely severed.

Editing the story

In the critical material on *La Chute*, the words ‘difficult’ and ‘enigmatic’ recur frequently. This one-sided dialogue, ostensibly about what it means to lead a just or righteous existence, consists of intricately woven, rainbow threads, forming a text perfused by extensive references to the Bible, to the Holocaust, to Dante, Nietzsche, Sartre, to other Camus texts, especially *L’Étranger*, and to much else besides. However, it is not so much its polysemic nature that has frustrated readers as its strange prosody, which interrupts the linearity of the text. To illustrate the nature of this arrhythmic narrative, I shall focus on two textual elements: firstly, the cluster of references around the doorman at Mexico City, a character known only by the Homeric epithet of ‘l’estimable gorille’, and secondly, the use of antiphrasis. And I shall cast this reading (of what is only the first few pages of the novella) in the light of the theory of the ‘left-brain interpreter’, which has been popularized by Michael Gazzaniga.

My starting-point for thinking about the estimable gorilla occurs some time – twelve pages of reading – after the character first appears. While delivering his encomium of the self, Clamence refers airily to the best-known idea of Nietzsche: ‘En vérité, à force d’être homme, avec tant de plénitude et de simplicité, je me trouvais un peu surhomme’ (III, 709). Within twenty words, this observation is countermanded by a slightly less obvious reference to Moses, and the burning bush, the Old Testament story which illustrates the omnipotence of God, rather than the age of the superman. At this point, the reader may recall Clamence’s admiration for the estimable gorilla and track back ten or so pages, where the primitive man is coupled with another biblical reference, this time to the Tower of Babel: ‘Imaginez l’homme de Cro-Magnon pensionnaire à la tour de Babel! Il y souffrirait de dépaysement, au moins. Mais non, celui-ci ne sent pas son exil, il va son chemin, rien ne l’entame’ (III, 697).

A referential circuit comprising Nietzsche, apes and the Bible is taking shape. However, Nietzsche is a richer source of ape references than the Bible. The aphorism in the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – ‘What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock, a thing of shame ... Ye have made your way from the worm to man, and much within you is still worm (.) Once were

ye apes, and even yet man is more of an ape than any of the apes' – is normally read as a rejection of western metaphysics, and especially the bogus set of moral values which, for Nietzsche, contaminates post-Hellenic philosophical systems. We are not who we think we are, as the 'disillusioned man' declares in *The Twilight of the Idols*: 'I sought for great men, I never found aught but the apes of their ideal' (p. 5). There are also connections with Red Peter, the aspirational ape in Kafka's short story *A Report to an Academy*, who, having evolved to the intelligence of the average European man, presents a report which takes the form of an autobiography.

One idea circulating in this network of references is the notion that there exists a mystical point on the evolutionary scale that the human species has yet to reach, perhaps the kind of secular sainthood to which the character Tarrou aspires in Camus's *La Peste*. Nietzsche feared that the species had already abandoned such a mission. The 'last man' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, whom Nietzsche describes as 'the most contemptible thing' (Prologue, 5), embodies the final stage of a complacent, uninspired humanity that has lost the will to dream or strive for anything greater than comfort. In Kafka's story, Red Peter reaches his endpoint:

With my hand in my trouser pockets, the bottle of wine on the table, I half lie and half sit in my rocking chair and gaze out of the window [...] When I come home late from banquets, from scientific societies, or from social gatherings in someone's home, a small, half-trained chimpanzee is waiting for me, and I take my pleasure with her the way apes do.

Clamence's misadventures in *La Chute* also appear to demonstrate that the quest for 'anything greater than comfort' is futile, that any form of idealism is chimeric. However, the meanings that may or may not emerge from the intertextual permutations of the text are less important for my purposes than the patterns of reading that they presuppose. Tracking Nietzsche in *La Chute* involves back-tracking. In this example, I have moved back from a point of recognition, through the narrative and then outside of it. The Nietzsche trail of textual references is one of many meandering through the rhizomatic text of *La Chute*, revealing the extent to which the narrator, whom we take to be Clamence, is constantly revising the telling of his life story. Gazzaniga's theory of the 'left-brain interpreter' suggests that this intense revisionism on Clamence's part is common to humanity. Our 'left-brain interpreter' is activated whenever we 'seek explanations for events, triage the barrage of incoming information and construct narratives that help to make sense of the world' (Wolman, 260). Proof of its existence came out of extraordinary medical circumstances.

Split-brain patients are a select group of people who, in the 1970s, underwent a radical treatment for acute epilepsy, which involved surgeons slicing through the corpus callosum, the bundle of neuronal fibres connecting the two halves of the brain. Their epilepsy was cured, but they experienced strange aftereffects, because the connection between the right side of the brain, which processes visual data, and the left, which controls speech and language, had been severed. However, further observations revealed that quite soon the subject was able to reconcile these disjunctions. So, the split-brain patient who initially struggled to shop in the supermarket was, a year post-surgery, able to tie shoelaces, play cards and go waterskiing.

After a career spent devising tests for split-brain patients, Michael Gazzaniga ascertained the existence of a biological function in the left hemisphere of the brain which overrides the contradictions and paradoxes in the world that might otherwise overwhelm the individual. Moreover, he has demonstrated since that this function, which, over time, allows us to recombine apparently irreconcilable elements until they provide a coherent shape to the world as we see it, is not exclusive to split-brain patients; rather, it is an inherent part of human anatomy. Applied to the study of *La Chute*, it explains the, at times, painful process of reading the novella, and moreover, how this

process mirrors the efforts with which Clamence attempts to make sense of his life. For like him, we are all editors of our lives, and in the digital era, we edit ourselves more conspicuously and more frequently than before, ironing out the folds as we construct profiles on social media and on dating apps, apply for jobs, and submit applications for promotion. The problem in *La Chute* is that from the very beginning, this human editing function is in overdrive. If we zoom in again on those first few pages, we encounter a text saturated in antiphrasis. This is a narrative which exists in predictive mode, like the machines on which we now depend that love to mis-correct what we tap into them. The meaning or truth of a statement or observation is immediately annulled by its opposite. The estimable gorilla is observed, hurrying along slowly, his silence deafening, like the pregnant silence of the ancient forests: 'il se hâte, avec une sage lenteur ... son mutisme est assourdissant. C'est le silence des forêts primitives, chargé jusqu'à la gueule' (III, 697). Another exquisitely self-conscious example occurs at the end of the second paragraph where, while still extolling the virtues of the apes, the narrator is already bemoaning the futility of trying to retrofit his own life: 'Quand on a beaucoup médité sur l'homme, par métier ou par vocation, il arrive qu'on éprouve de la nostalgie pour les primates. Ils n'ont pas, eux, d'arrière-pensées' (III, 698). Herein lies the fable of *La Chute*: no matter how compulsively we edit and re-edit the past, we cannot change it.

The primal scene?

In *Traces of War*, Colin Davis escapes the textual cannibalism of *La Chute* by plucking a historical reference, again from this opening section, where Clamence exclaims: Moi, j'habite le quartier juif, ou ce qui s'appelait ainsi jusqu'au moment où les frères hitlériens y ont fait de la place. Quel lessivage ! Soixante-quinze mille juifs déportés ou assassinés, c'est le nettoyage par le vide (III, 701).

Following in the slipstream of Shoshana Felman's psychoanalytically inflected analyses of post-Holocaust literary texts, Davis pursues the notion that the Nazi hecatomb operates as a master trope in *La Chute*, especially in relation to what he and Felman refer to as 'the primal scene', when the woman falls from the bridge over the River Seine. The impressionistic sparseness of the reportage (the cold, the darkness, the splash and the cries), the anonymity of the victim, and the guilt of Clamence, are evocative but, for Davis, not synecdochical. Unlike Felman, in whose book he sees 'signs that Camus's text is being enlisted to support a reading which it does not fully endorse' (Davis, 103), Davis finds that the ethics pertaining to the falling woman are as 'messy' at this juncture in the text as they are at others. Both are wise to the political undercurrents swirling around *La Chute*, though Davis is nervous about Felman's fulsome praise of Camus's condemnation of the Soviet gulags. However, neither is fully in step with the rhythm of the text, for the story of the woman falling from the bridge is, as all readers and teachers of the novel know, the pivotal event, the moment when, as Camus famously remarks in the 'Prière d'insérer' (which appears as the fourth appendix in the Pléiade edition), Clamence holds a mirror up to his audience: 'Il [Clamence] se dépêche donc de faire son propre procès mais c'est pour mieux juger les autres. Le miroir dans lequel il se regarde, il finit par le tendre aux autres' (III, 771). He walks on – the water would have been so cold – but what would you do?

There is no respite in the past. Kierkegaard surmised that 'while a life can only be understood in hindsight, or "backward," as it were, it must be lived forward' (Gosetti-Ferencei, 4). Davis is worried about the assumptions we might make. Was the woman pushed? Did she fall, or was the noise of the splash made by something else? However, at this point, exactly halfway through the novella, the hyperbole, the antiphrasis and the irony melt away, the narrative is planed smooth, the style now

limpid. As the narrator instructs us, the swarm of antithetical word-thoughts has flown off: 'Pour que la statue soit nue, les beaux discours doivent s'envoler' (III, 728). This is the moment for action.

The fall from the bridge is foreshadowed several times in the text, but the one previous existential incident concerns a story Clamence has been told, about an old woman in his village forced by a German officer to designate which of her two sons held hostage would be shot: 'Choisir, imaginez-vous cela? Celui-là? Non, celui-ci. Et le voir partir' (III, 701). It is, of course, unimaginable, an impossible choice presented as a dialectical clinch. However, the character of the event that haunts Clamence is entirely different. Dramatic though a woman plunging into the river at night might be, it is also prosaic. Were Clamence to have turned back, a raft of different options would have presented themselves, short of him diving into the river. He might have shouted for help, thrown a floatable object towards the woman in the water, or waded as far as he could towards her before holding out a stick. This is because the fall from the bridge is not a 'primal scene', instead, it is closer to the kind of incident that punctuates everyday life.

We can infer from the work of evolutionary biologist Patricia Smith Churchland on altruism genes in monkeys, voles and infant children that most people, unlike Clamence, would have turned back. This is because our responses in such circumstances are determined by the clustering of oxytocin receptors in those parts of the brain that are conducive to the pleasurable aspects of sociality. At birth, the human brain has a bonding pattern, regulated by oxytocin and a palette of other neurochemicals and neurohormones. This, Smith Churchland surmises, is the basic platform for morality. Moreover, she insists, citing the moral norms in hunter-gatherer groups such as the Inuit, and the progressive social institutions put in place by the pantheistic Mongols under Genghis Khan, that our instincts to act and speak morally are not predicated on religious authority, on belief in a law-giving God. We are mostly good Samaritans, not because many of us listened to the parable as infants, but because helping others makes us happy.

Smith Churchland acknowledges that communities unguided by religious orders can be harsh environments. The development of laws and constitutions that provide for an ethical framework in secular societies will always be a complex, evolving process. Neuroscience has its limitations. It cannot tell us, for example, whether it is appropriate to use drones to kill terrorists or to interfere with the human genome. In resolving such matters, Smith Churchland affirms, we, as diverse groups of humans, are on our own; there is no path back to God. Echoing Camus's view that the unmediated human experience rather than any ideological or religious tenet should always be central to any discussion on the problems of existence, she issues a memorable clarion call: '...there is no algorithm for generating answers; there is no metaphysical entity to appeal to and no magical faculty of pure reason ... there is no JUSTICE; there is just us' (Caruso and Flanagan, 35).

Conclusion: The Bad Samaritan?

As he leaves the Netherlands, Clamence contrasts the misty, contourless Zuyderzee, '...avec ses bords plats, perdus dans la brume, on ne sait où elle commence, où elle finit' – with the stark visibility of the Aegean – 'Dans l'archipel grec, j'avais l'impression contraire. Sans cesse de nouvelles îles apparaissaient sur le cercle de l'horizon. Leur échine sans arbres traçait la limite du ciel, leur rivage rocheux tranchait nettement sur la mer' (III, 741). This familiar refrain, which expresses Camus's preference for the structured thought of Ancient Greece over what he saw as the vagaries of modern European philosophy, is also one of the many instances scattered across his œuvre, especially in the short stories, where reference is made to the immutability of stone. The Sahara Desert is often cast as a metaphysical arena, there is Sisyphus and his boulder, and the stele erected in honour

of Camus at the coastal spot of Tipaza, graffitied and stained in the years since, but still there. Camus's ethics were stony, durable and irreducible. He was a warrior, fighting poverty, nationalism, racism and social injustice. He condemned totalitarianism and terrorism, and he was a lifelong campaigner against the death penalty at a time when many on the Left saw it as a natural component of the penal system. But he also understood that his activism, which took many forms (including literature) and espoused many causes, was an investigation on a large scale that spanned his life, 'son interrogation, vaste, sur ce qui constitue notre humanité et ses ombres' (Morisi, 327).

La Chute is situated in the shadows of our humanity. Unlike Camus, Clamence would be classed by neuroscientists as aberrant, if not sociopathic, a person whose brain has a depleted stock of oxytocin receptors. He sees himself as a bad Samaritan. In the last paragraph of the novella, he begs for a second chance, but even then, he knows that the water will be so very cold, and he will scuttle home, forever the man who failed to act. His story, with its strange mixture of bombast and confession, is the floundering of a man in fear of judgement, a subtle variation on the standard Camus topos of the condemned man. Attack, however, suggests that he is an exemplary creation, a man attempting to reckon with his own past, racked with guilt at his own shortcomings but ultimately resisting the lure of self-sacrifice, refusing to be part of what René Girard calls 'le mécanisme social fondamental' of the scapegoat. In other words, Clamence has no intention of jumping into the water simply to reassure his reader, to make us feel better about ourselves. But this cannot imply that he is a scapegoat because the notion of a secular scapegoat is an outrageous conflation of the theological and the existential, like the examples of antiphrasis that proliferate on the first page of the novella. We recall that the thief of the panels of *The Ghent Altarpiece* returned the one depicting John the Baptist while retaining 'Les Juges intègres'. In *La Chute*, therefore, Clamence abandons the messianic aspect, signified by his first name, that he initially attributes to himself, and is left to plead for the clemency that he personifies through his rather odd surname. The role of the scapegoat is integral to the complex workings of Christian theology; it is a status to which he cannot accede, represented in the artwork which he desecrated in the form of the Mystic Lamb, eyes fixed on the viewer, a jet of blood extending from its throat to the vessel below, the Christian symbol par excellence of the scapegoat.

In the light of Gazzaniga's discovery of the 'left-brain interpreter', Clamence's compulsive revisiting of his past may be seen as positive, in that it is genuinely ontological. However, the fall in this story is no longer the fall from Eden; it is a woman falling from the Pont Royal bridge in Paris. It signifies the importance of ethical conduct in communities no longer regulated by the sacraments. Smith Churchland's work demonstrates that the pro-social disposition of the human species is a biological fact, that the vast majority of us are inhabited by what Rousseau called 'la pitié', an instinctual reaching out towards the other. Clamence doesn't reach out. He knows that he will be condemned, as so many in France were for their conduct during the Second World War, because he failed to act ethically.

ORCID iD

David Philip Platten  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9580-7178>

References

- Attack M (1989) *Literature and the French Resistance. Cultural Politics and Narrative Forms*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bayard P (2013) *Aurais-je été résistant ou bourreau?* Paris: Minuit.
- Camus A (2006–2008) *Œuvres Complètes I–IV*. Paris: La Pléiade.

- Carroll D (2007) *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Caruso GD and Flanagan O (2018) *Neuroexistentialism. Meaning, Morals and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deranty J-P (2011) The tender indifference of the world: Camus' theory of the flesh. *Sophia* 50: 513–525.
- Dhanens E (1973) *Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece*. New York: The Viking Press.
- Ellison DR (1983) Camus and the rhetoric of dizziness: 'La Chute'. *Contemporary Literature* 24(3): 322–348.
- Girard R (1986) *Le Bouc émissaire*. Paris: LGF.
- Gosetti-Ferencei J (2021) *On Being and Becoming. An Existentialist Approach to Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hartsock M (1961-2) Camus' 'The Fall': Dialogue of one. *Modern Fiction Studies* 7.4: 357–364.
- Iacoboni M (2009) *Mirroring People. The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others*. London: Picador.
- Kafka F (2015) *A Report to an Academy, 1917*. Books on Demand. Available at <https://www.perlego.com/home>. Accessed 23 October 2025.
- Levine G (2022) *The Question of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lottman H (1979) *Albert Camus. A Biography*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Morisi E (2011) *Albert Camus contre la peine de mort*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Nietzsche F (2019) *Twilight of the Idols, 1898*. Dover Publications. Available at <https://www.perlego.com/home>. Accessed 22 October 2025.
- Nietzsche F (2020) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 1883–1891*. Laurus Book Society. Available at <https://www.perlego.com/home>. Accessed 22 October 2025.
- Onfray M (2012) *L'ordre libertaire. La vie philosophique d'Albert Camus*. Paris: J'ai Lu.
- Viggiani CA (1960) Camus and the fall from innocence. *Yale French Studies* 25: 65–71.
- Wheeler BM (1982) Beyond despair: Camus' 'The Fall' and Van Eyck's 'Adoration of the Lamb'. *Contemporary Literature* 23(3): 343–364.
- Wolman D (2012) The split-brain: A tale of two halves. *Nature* 483: 260–263.

Author biography

David Philip Platten is Professor of Modern French Studies at the University of Leeds and author of numerous studies of francophone and anglophone crime fiction, world crime fiction in translation, and true crime, including *The Pleasures of Crime: Readings in French Crime Fiction* (2011). In addition to monographs on Michel Tournier and Philippe Djian, he has also published book chapters and articles on the literary thriller, comics, and popular cinema in France. He is currently working on a book provisionally entitled *Coming back to Camus*, which examines the resonance in today's world of one of the most influential voices of twentieth-century world literature.