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The Sartre-Camus Quarrel and the Fall of the French Intellectual

William E. Duvall [a]

[a] Department of History, Willamette University, 900 State Street, Salem, Oregon 97301, USA

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The Sartre–Camus Quarrel and the Fall of the French Intellectual

William E. Duvall

Abstract *Over the past thirty years, the disappearance, if not the death, of the intellectual in France has been the focus of significant conversation and debate. Yet a good bit earlier, two writers who epitomized that very figure of the intellectual, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, in works written after their bitter break, seemed to have already sensed this decline. The present essay explores what Camus's novel* La Chute *[The fall] and Sartre's autobiography* Les Mots *[The words] share thematically and, in particular, how both works anticipate the fall of the French intellectual.*

When Albert Camus first introduced himself to Jean-Paul Sartre in 1943 as the latter's play, *Les Mouches* [The flies], was preparing to open, they were not complete strangers. Each had previously written a rather positive review of the other's first novel. Sartre wrote *Huis clos* [No exit] for Camus to direct and act in, while Camus asked Sartre to write a series of articles for *Combat*. Drawn into friendship by a shared left-leaning revolutionary hopefulness and a common opposition to de Gaulle at the time of the liberation, they were closely associated as philosophers and existentialists, despite Camus's vigorous and consistent denial of both appellations. Together they emblematized the idea of the French intellectual—that rich combination of philosopher, public writer, *littérateur*, moral light, and political activist—who was able with enormous cultural capital to assume a rather Olympian and oracular position above the vulgar and the fray of everyday life and to speak on matters for which there can be no experts, matters of universal values and ultimate ends.

There is little question that in both popular and scholarly imaginations, Sartre stands as the personification of this intellectual. His skillful synthesis of literature, philosophy, and journalism installed him in a position at once marginal, critical and dominant; at once public accuser and totalizing universal conscience. Popular legend made this philosophy teacher a resistance hero, even though Sartre himself admitted that his only wartime action had been taken with pens in left-bank Paris cafes. A philosopher who produced

Department of History, Willamette University, 900 State Street, Salem, Oregon 97301, USA. Email: bduvall@willamette.edu

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weighty and difficult tomes as well as a writer of novels, stage plays, and biographies, Sartre moved steadily from the anxiety and despair of his existential philosophy of the 1940s to an existential Marxism of the 1960s. Good bourgeois that he was, he sought to speak for the international proletariat. He was *the* engaged intellectual *de la gauche* (of the left), signing petitions and pronouncing on every political issue, climbing barricades with students and workers during the May–June days of 1968, handing out Maoist tracts in the streets of Paris. In the first issue of his journal, *Les Temps modernes* [Modern times], just after the war, he made his "turn" clear:

> Since the writer has no way of escaping, we want him to embrace his era—tightly. . . . We don't want to miss out on anything in our time . . . we have only *this* life to live, amid *this* war, and perhaps *this* revolution. . . . Even if we were as deaf and dumb as pebbles, our very passivity would be an action. . . . The writer is *situated* in his time: every word he utters has reverberations. As does his silence. . . . In summary, our intention is to help effect certain changes in the Society that surrounds us. . . . one is responsible for what one is. . . . Totally committed and totally free. And yet it is the free man who must be *delivered*, by enlarging his possibilities of choice.[1]

Even if his reputation suffered a bit after his death, Sartre still loomed over much of mid-century France in mythically heroic proportions as, in John Gerassi's words, the "hated conscience of his century."[2]

Camus, Sartre's compatriot in the swirl of left-bank life during and after the war and occupation, also holds "star" status as intellectual. French–Algerian, born into poverty in working class Algiers, and therefore an outsider to Parisian social and academic privilege, Camus nevertheless commanded French attention as a wartime resistance, and then liberation period, journalist for *Combat*. Herbert Lottman suggests that he "was a moral guide to a generation demanding change,"[3] and Tony Judt calls Camus "THE French intellectual" and "the moral voice of his era."[4] The Nobel Prize committee referred to him as "one of the world's foremost literary antagonists of totalitarianism."[5] A novelist, playwright, and philosophical essayist, Camus struggled with the implications of modern revolution, totalitarianism, and legitimized murder in the context of what he called the Absurd. His genealogies of rebellion trace the modern overthrow of the kingdom of grace in the name of human reason, freedom and justice, but argue that the initial values of rebellion have consistently been subordinated to the absolute historicist ideals of revolutionaries who, in the name of the salvation of humans in some distant future, sacrifice humans now. (Sartre's emerging existential Marxism fell directly under Camus's critical gaze in this regard!) Healthy rebellion, which demands unity, solidarity, and lucidity has too often given way to abstract notions of historical forces and to domination.[6] Sartre himself recognized a "stubborn" humanism in Camus's rejection of history and placed him in "that long line of moralists whose works perhaps constitute what is most original in French letters."[7]

It is now clear that already prior to 1952 tensions had grown between Camus and Sartre and that little remained of their friendship.[8] But the brutal and final break between them, a personal and philosophical but, above all, political parting, as they disagreed about communism and anti-communism, came on the heels of the appearance of Camus's lengthy philosophical essay, *L'Homme révolté* [The rebel] and a review of it in *Les Temps modernes*. In the August 1952 issue of Sartre's journal, Camus's wounded and aggressive

response appeared, as did Sartre's still more antagonistic letter to Camus. Their friendship, indeed, any relationship between them, was over.

The story of that quarrel has been told repeatedly and from many perspectives, most recently and thoroughly by Ronald Aronson and David Sprintzen.[9] My task here is not to retell it or to determine who won this quarrel. Rather, I wish to take a brief glance at later works by both writers, Camus' *La Chute* [The fall] (1956) and Sartre's unfinished autobiography, *Les Mots* [The words] (1964), with an eye to how they digested their quarrel. And I want to reflect on how, together, they anticipate the "death of the French intellectual" so emphatically pronounced since the 1980s.[10]

Sartre thought highly of *La Chute*. In a statement a few days after Camus died in 1960, he wrote: "One lived with or against [Camus's] thought, such as he revealed to us in his books—*La Chute*, above all, perhaps the most beautiful and the least understood."[11] Buried in *L'Idiot de la famille* [Idiot of the family], Sartre's massive study of Flaubert, are several surprisingly positive allusions to Camus's thought, and Sartre uses images Camus had popularized—of Sisyphus, of a fall, of victim and executioner—to analyze Flaubert. He even applies the term Camus's hero in *La Chute* employs as a self-identification; on more than one occasion Flaubert is "judge-penitent" playing loser wins like Clamence. Further, throughout Sartre's 1960 play, *Les Séquestrés d'Altona* [The sequestered of Altona], one finds many echoes of Clamence, particularly in the character of Franz. Much of the play portrays Franz and his family struggling with twentieth-century guilt (for complicity with Nazism), with a sense of fallenness, with a desire to confess and to bear witness, but above all to confess before being judged by others, with a fear of, but also desire for, judgment. While Franz admits to playing loser wins, it is perhaps Johanna who best sums up the strategies Franz and his family engage, strategies which strongly point toward those of Clamence: "There are many ways of holding a man prisoner. The best is to get him to imprison himself."[12] My point here is to suggest that, while Sartre was working in the late 1950s and early 1960s on his autobiography, *Les Mots* (he was also working on his Flaubert at this time), Camus's *La Chute* was very much on his mind.

That novel, a monologue by Jean-Baptiste Clamence, has been read as Camus's response to what he felt *Les Temps modernes* had leveled at him in 1952—brutally harsh criticism and unfair, dishonest, and absolute judgment. *La Chute* has also been interpreted as a direct sarcastic and ironic caricature of Sartre.[13] That Camus did indeed think of Sartre in connection with Clamence is indicated in an entry of 14 December 1954 in his *Carnets* [Notebooks] and again in the "Avant-Propos" of his 1958 *Actuelles III* [Actualities III], a collection of his writings on Algeria. In both texts he implicitly but directly links Sartre to the notion of judge-penitent:

> From the *Carnets*:
> Existentialism. When they accuse themselves one can be certain that this is done in order to overpower and crush others. Judges-penitents.[14]
>
> And from *Actuelles III*:
> If certain French think that, through its colonial undertakings, France (and she alone amidst nations holy and pure) is in a state of historical sin, they don't have to designate the French of Algeria as victims of the atonement; they owe it to themselves to offer themselves in expiation. I find disgusting confessions of guilt, in the mode of our

> judges-penitents, offered on the breasts of others as empty condemnations of several centuries of European expansion.[15]

With *La Chute* on his mind as he wrote *Les Mots*, Sartre may well have appropriated something of Clamence and the notion of the judge-penitent to his own self-assessment. One might also read *La Chute* as a piece of Camusian self-criticism, reflecting an internalization of the judgment of *Les Temps modernes*. Clamence is neither Sartre nor Camus *tout court*, but each could see himself in the character and the role.[16]

Clamence looks back on his life before his "fall" and describes himself as a man of fine phrases and noble causes, of heights and summits. He was a master of his liberalities, he refused all honors and recognition, he soared, he did not have to learn how to live. In short, he was a higher man. His fall occurred incrementally, first at the hands of a motorcyclist who humiliated him, then with a woman who told others of his sexual deficiencies, but mostly as a young woman jumped into the Seine late one evening: though Clamence heard the splash and her cries, he did nothing in response to help her. His haunting sense of guilt brings on his re-evaluation, and his monologue oozes with self-parody and bitter irony.

Beneath his virtues and humility there had lain, he notes, a selfishness and self-centeredness; he had merely been a play actor, a hypocrite. He adopted the "profession" of judge-penitent out of a need to dominate and to stop decent people from thinking they are innocent. Insisting that one is responsible for one's face, he holds out a mirror; he confesses his fall, his guilt, his hypocrisies, his lack of virtue. He invites his silent interlocutor to judge him, but in doing so, insists that he be sure to look in the mirror, to reflect on and judge himself. In an echo of Sartre's, "hell is other people," Clamence notes that people judge others in order to elude the judgment of others. This empty prophet of shallow times who lives in a madhouse world sees that judgments without law or foundation are ubiquitous. Clamence's strategy is to accuse himself, thereby to get others on his side and to beat them to judgment. But he projects from his center, confessing his own guilt as a means of testifying to the guilt of all. A twentieth-century Everyman totalizing the self, he spreads the virus of his guilt. He has no friends, only accomplices. Along the way, he scoffs at an old friend, a boring moralist, at humanists and moralists in general, who, he says, are only Christians without God, at truth-telling and sincerity, at cafe sitting Paris intellectuals, and at any persons who would dare to consider forgiving themselves. Here Clamence might well be Camus offering the self-parody mentioned earlier.

In the last thirty pages of the novel, Camus seems to aim Clamence's self-analysis directly at Sartre. Clamence ironically comments on the "temptation" of the resistance during the war, his tendency to sign manifestoes and petitions, the unbearable weight of freedom, the slavery of the collective, and promises of a blessed future. He confesses to an immense arrogance and detestation of life, the combination of which leads him to desire to crush others. And he says he grows taller and taller in the process! Always talking about freedom, he is an enlightened advocate of slavery and servitude. In the end, as interlocutors come and go, he is always merely talking—words, words, words!

The echoes of Clamence in *Les Mots* make it tempting to consider *La Chute* as its second volume, which Sartre promised but never completed. Even as a child, Sartre enjoyed heights and summits, soaring above others (in a fifth floor apartment in the rue le

Goff!). His father had died before he knew him, so he was without superego, free, marked by levity. And his grandfather taught him of the sublime. From these heights he gave of himself, graciously, especially to his inferiors, encouraging them to believe in the lie that they were his equals.

Like Clamence, Sartre's fall was incremental, marked by a growing realization that he was neither a destiny nor a genius and that his family relationships and his youthful pretense to reading and writing were fraudulent and mere hypocritical play-acting. The adult Sartre judges this youthful imposture as a learning to live in the irreal, and suggests that the fatherless youth came to sense that he was superfluous and without substance or reason for living; he had no ticket to show the ticket-taker, no justification for being on the train! In this, however, he was just like everybody else. The remembering Sartre laces his judgment with class guilt for his youthful privilege and blames the bourgeoisie for his irreality, the consequence of living with books and with authors as his playmates. The youth continued his fall, perceiving his own ugliness and then seeing that others too saw his flaws, including his insincerity. He sought to humble himself—by making horrible faces in a mirror!—in order to evade humiliation. The adult Sartre perceives a growing self-hatred in the child, as he filled his vacancy with the imaginary and prepared for his calling as bourgeois writer living in bourgeois solitude.

If in the first part of his autobiography, Sartre portrayed words as offering a sort of defense—that is, the child believed that if he talked enough, the ticket-taker would not put him off the train—in the second part, when he began to write, the youth believed that words were real things: they realized the imaginary. Though he still play-acted, plagiarized, imitated others, mistook himself for original, the youthful writer sensed the power of creating an "other"—over his fictional characters he became a tyrant with the heady omnipotence of making them do anything. Anything was possible! The young Sartre seemed to be finding his being, his necessity, his ticket, in writing; the elder seems to mock his own existential philosophy of self-creation. There is a sort of climax in *Les Mots*: the adult Sartre reflects that he had often written against himself, which, he says, means against everybody; everyone lacks being, after all. He adds an illuminating footnote: "Be self-indulgent, and those who are also self-indulgent will like you. Tear your neighbor to pieces, and the other neighbors will laugh. But if you beat your soul, all souls will cry out" (164).

Admitting that "one doesn't get cured of one's self" (254), Sartre adapts his confession to the ironizing strategies of the judge-penitent. He offers himself as a "universal singular"—as individual he is everybody. The tactic is Clamence's—the confession of guilt and the irreality of virtues are everyone's. But the harshest series of self-judgments focus on Sartre the writer. "I have a foreboding," he says, "of the severity with which I shall judge myself tomorrow." And: "I'm always ready to criticize myself, provided I'm not forced to" (239). He takes on the language of Clamence, the language of the court room, and is his own witness for the prosecution. Accusing himself of a lucid blindness:

> As a militant, I wanted to save myself by works; as a mystic, I attempted to reveal the silence of being by a thwarted rustling of words and, what was most important, I confused things with their names. . . . I saw everything wrong. . . . I gaily demonstrated that man is impossible; I was impossible myself and differed from the others only by the

> mandate to give expression to that impossibility. . . . Fake to the marrow of my bones and hoodwinked, I joyfully wrote about our unhappy state. . . . I doubted everything except that I was the elect of doubt. I built with one hand what I destroyed with the other, and I regarded anxiety as the guarantee of my security; I was happy. (250–52)

Writing, he says, was his refusal to live. He lived backwards, posthumously, by relishing the presumed immortality of his future. Further, he confesses to a certain impotence; he wrote by spewing, always in a flurry of words, never really finishing anything. Ironically, he promises to write more and explain further his thinking against himself, but he never produced a second volume of *Les Mots*. Words which came to him in a flurry were a trap, preventing him from living his present, from acting and engaging with others. Most poignantly, Sartre admits that he had mistaken the pen for a sword and concludes: "I now know we're powerless" (253–54). His 1952 critique of Camus was hardly more brutal.

What I wish to conclude at this point is that well before the dramatic announcements of the 1980s about the death of the intellectual, and in part at least as the consequence of coming to terms with the bitter exchange of criticism that constituted their quarrel and break, Camus and Sartre already employed the ironic strategies of the judge-penitent to confront and turn away from the role of intellectual they had early on so fully embodied. Camus, wounded by that exchange and paralyzed by the growing horror of the French–Algerian war, retreated into virtual silence for a number of years, until *La Chute* and Clamence. He was beginning to break his silence again just before his death, returning to his roots and most personal values, to what he called Mediterranean thought, as the unfinished, *Le Premier homme* [The first man] (1994) attests. Sartre's attack on Camus had been offered implicitly in defense of the *intellectuel de la gauche* (intellectual of the left), a position he struggled to maintain through the May–June days of 1968. Disillusioned after 1968, Sartre retreated not into silence but into words. In *Les Mots* Sartre had already arrived at the conclusion that his vocation of engaged writer and intellectual was empty and marked by powerlessness. Now he escaped into, buried himself under, the millions of words, written and rewritten after 1968, which fill the five volumes and some 2,800 pages of *L'Idiot de la famille*.

Notes

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Présentation des *Temps modernes*," in *Situations, II, Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1948), 7–30. See also "Introducing *Les Temps modernes*," in Jean-Paul Sartre, *"What is Literature?" and Other Essays*, ed. Steven Ungar, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 252, 255, 264, and 265.
2. John Gerassi, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated Conscience of His Century*, vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
3. Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (London: Picador, 1981), 1.
4. Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 87, 88. See also Tony Judt, "The Lost World of Albert Camus," *New York Review of Books*, 6 October 1994, 3–5.
5. Judt, "The Lost World of Albert Camus."
6. See William E. Duvall, "Camus Reading Nietzsche: Rebellion, Memory and Art," *History of European Ideas* 25.1–2 (1999), and "Albert Camus against History," *The European Legacy* 10.2 (2005).

7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations*, trans. Benita Eisler (New York: George Braziller, 1965), 109–10.
8. Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 266–9; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Putnam, 1965), 271–72.
9. See Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation*, ed. and trans. David Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven (New York: Humanity Books, 2004).
10. Pierre Nora announced in 1980 that the universalizing intellectual oracle had had its day, having been replaced by the technician, the specialist, the expert, the scholar, the university professor, as well as the journalist and the media "intellectual," at the same time that within the French university there occurred a shift in emphasis from the humanities (literature, philosophy) to the human sciences, from reflection to method and technique. In all of this, he says, the ethical function of the thinker disintegrated. See Pierre Nora, "Que peuvent les intellectuels?" *Le Débat* 1 (May 1980): 3. Coincidentally, 1980 is the year Sartre died. So did Roland Barthes. Jacques Lacan died in 1981, Raymond Aron in 1983, Michel Foucault in 1984, and Simone de Beauvoir in 1986. The brightest lights of two intellectual generations in France were quite literally dying away. Jean-Francois Lyotard, three years later in a *Le Monde* article entitled, "*Tombeau de l'intellectuel*" [Tomb of the intellectual] (16 July 1983) suggested that the social and political interventions of the universalizing, totalizing intellectual were troublesome, misleading and impossible. The death of the intellectual has been a slow one apparently, for in celebrating the twentieth anniversary of his journal, *Le Débat*, the first issue of which contained the article mentioned above, Nora entitled another article, "Adieu aux intellectuels?" [Good-bye to the intellectuals]. As a side note, Lois Oppenheim has noted that between 1980 and 2001 over 100 books focused on the intellectual were published in France. See "France Takes Its Intellectuals to Heart, Even As They Doubt Themselves," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 September 2001.
11. Sartre, *Situations*, 109.
12. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Condemned of Altona*, trans. Sylvia and George Leeson (New York: Random House-Vintage, 1963), 20.
13. See, for example, Jean-Yves Guérin, *Albert Camus: Portrait de l'artiste en citoyen* (Paris: Editions Francois Bourin, 1993), 130.
14. Albert Camus, *Carnets III, Mars 1951–Décembre 1959* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1989), 147. "Existentialisme. Quand ils s'accusent on peut être sûr que c'est toujours pour accabler les autres. Des juges pénitents."
15. Albert Camus, *Essais* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1965), 897–98. "Si certains Français considèrent que, par ses entreprises coloniales, la France (et elle seule, au milieu de nations saintes et pures) est en état de péché historique, ils n'ont pas à désigner les Français d'Algérie comme victimes expiatoires . . . , ils doivent s'offrir eux-mêmes à l'expiation. . . . [I]l me paraît dégoûtant de battre sa coulpe, comme nos juges-penitents, sur la poitrine d'autrui, vain de condamner plusieurs siècles d'expansion européenne."
16. Roger Quilliot and others have pointed to parallels between Camus's novel and Sartre's autobiography. I wish here to reflect specifically on how the strategies of the judge-penitent link the two books.