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# Final and Larval Spectrality in Albert Camus' *The Fall*

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**Abstract**
This philosophical survey of literature introduces a spectral reading of Albert Camus' multi-layered text *The Fall*. Readings on the spectral usually embark on the elements that haunt the subjectivity of the narrator, Jean-Baptiste Clamence. Within the affluence of potential meanings and allusions in the text, I focus on two places—Paris and Amsterdam—that have become "possessed," or more specifically, places that have become "spaces of the spectral." Amid the text's enigmatic character, a spectral reading highlights the particular uncanny turn that disturbs in the plot. I argue that the mentions of Paris and Amsterdam in the text function within the ambit of the spectral. Reviewing the models for spectral readings of place, I make use of Giorgio Agamben's lens of spectrality. For Agamben, there breed two types of spectrality in a place, namely, 'Final' and 'Larval.' Putting this perspective on the position of Clamence, this reading respectively exposes Paris as having final spectrality and Amsterdam as having larval spectrality.

**Keywords** Agamben · Camus · Final and larval · Spectrality

## Introduction

Camus' *The Fall* can be read as a text with "apparently uncontrollable multiple meanings that inhere within its personal and allusive potential" (Ellison 2007, 178). It is Jean-Paul Sartre's favorite (Roberts 2008, 874), which he regards as Camus' most beautiful text. But it is also at the same time the least understood (Aronson 2004, 5), or in F. Locke's words "the most enigmatic" (1967, 306). Within this affluence of meaning, there is a certain oddity in the place which Jean-Baptiste Clamence narrates himself. He stands in an uncanny position between living his present life and the past that disturbs him. In "On the Uses and Disadvantages of history for life," Nietzsche elaborates how the past affects the human "like a vision of a

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lost paradise," which makes him a child that "plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of the past and the future" (1997, 61). He goes on to explicate that the past "is a matter for wonder: a moment, now here and then gone, nothing before it came, again nothing after it has gone, nonetheless returns as a ghost and disturbs the peace of a later moment" (Nietzsche 1997, 61). In *The Fall*, Clamence and his memory, says Sharpe, "were 'called' in an *umheimlich* near-repetition of the traumatic scene of his first inaction" (2002, 177). Such a fundamental disturbance allows for the uncanny to ruminate and linger. This concept of *unheimlichkeit* or "uncanniness" is well defined "in Heidegger as in Freud" as "the element of haunting (the other at home, the reapparition of specters, etc.)" (Solomon 2004, 41). The uncanny posits a kind of insistence that is founded on an original delirious spectralization (Kahambing 2019, 76).[1] The idea is that there is no exhaustive list or taxonomy of spectralities or mechanisms of the spectral, but what is common in them is that they function as a disadjointing agency that disturbs as their inherent deliriousness. This philosophical survey of literature looks into this spectralization in Camus' novel and seeks its insistence in spaces.

## Spectral Spaces, Agamben and Camus

A spectral reading of *The Fall* normally directs the gaze into Clamence whose subjectivity cannot be separated from his being troubled with the duality of his existence (Kahambing 2020a). Clamence remains rootless, unable to confront his being a judge and a penitent. Hence, a specter haunts him to narrate his hypocritical life. But a closer look at this position ironically redirects a wider perspective. What if his two-facedness is spectral not because of his disposition but of his position? A critical gap opens here by way of introducing a spectral reading of not the subject but the place.

Blanco and Peeren (2013, 395) in "Possessions: Spectral Places" sketch "haunting's attachment to place, from homes and buildings to expansive landscapes in which specific events—often cataclysmic—have transpired." Each theorizing of spectral locations in Vidler, Baer, Matless, and Agamben crosses borders of ontological and phenomenological readings and represents "models for looking at place (and space) in its historical profundity" (399). Vidler focuses on archaeology, Baer on photography, Matless on cultural geography, and Agamben on the spectral prolepsis of contemporary place. Agamben's analysis (2013) presents a "retrospective logic" which "tips forward on its axis, invoking the specter to think proleptically." This means that, in some sense, both prolepsis and retrospection are employed by Agamben to acquire in a novel perspective in seeing things. This philosophical lens allows for Clamence's experience in *The Fall* to find affinity with that of viewing

[1] A delirious specter is the original name of spectralization. Cheah (2003) mentions delirious spectrality as "more originary" since it is "the sheer possibility of crossing the line between death and life; it is the condition of possibility." Continues Cheah (2003), "without originary spectrality, no crossing between life and death would be possible. To be sure, no ghosts would be possible" (334).

the spectrality of the places he has been in. More particularly, this points to the two places which incite spectrality: his current place (prolepsis) and his previous place (retrospection). As such, Agamben's theory becomes useful in examining the novel's haunting of place.

Agamben's relationship with Camus that relates to the rootlessness of existence forms a spectral detaching of oneself even to one's place as becoming "exiles, emigrants, or refugees" (Sharpe 2015, 93).[2] This relation is particularly strong in *The Fall* where universal guilt assumes a justification for being politically—or existentially—apprehensive with setting oneself in place. Agamben advances Camus' ideas in a sense that it puts Clamence in a spectral location. The necessity of this move akins itself to prolepsis as well, albeit the method constantly looks into the novel's text in retrospect. As Sharpe (2016, 77) argues: "Camus's anticipations of ideas more recently developed in Giorgio Agamben's thought would make for an interesting scholarly study." With Camus and Agamben, the lacuna of place's haunting addresses the gap of spectral places in the novel. This paper argues that what is unique in the spectrality of the text is not the ghost of a person but a ghost of a place—of a spectral or possessed space.[3] As if to follow from Nietzsche's title, for Giorgio Agamben in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living with Specters" (2013), this points to two kinds of spectrality which reside in places: final and larval. From these spectralizations, Clamence is torn between two places—Paris and Amsterdam—where each represents a particular spectrality.

## Paris, Falling, and Final Spectrality

Spectrality connotes a continuity of a dead state or an advance from a place where the dead is. For Agamben, a place is no longer dead if somehow it still exists "only because it has managed to move beyond the state that follows death and the consequent decomposition of the corpse" (Agamben 2013, 473). This new state, he continues, is "that of the specter, of the dead who appears without warning, preferably in the middle of the night, creaking and sending signals, sometimes even speaking, though in a way that is not always intelligible" (2013, 473).

Such a place where deadness abounds can only be named as hell. R. Solomon gives two senses of hell in the text. First, he says: "what is Hell? Here is one answer: five straight days of conversation with a garrulous, narcissistic, rather depraved lawyer" (2004, 41). Second, "there is another definition of Hell: it is having 'fallen,' from the heights and happiness to the depths of despair, from success and virtue to failure and depravity, and bitterly, exquisitely remembering it" (2004, 41). The 'fall'

[2] See Camus' *The Plague* (1991). This also reflects Agamben's analysis of the *homo sacer* that forms the state of exception. Clamence, the subject in *the Fall*, presents a universality that represents the *homo sacer* condition of humanity. As Žižek claims on the underpinnings of the *homo sacer*: "it is not that we should fight for the inclusion of the excluded, but that homo sacer is the 'truth' of all of us" (2010, 125).

[3] *Place*, "as marked out from more general *space* by people's use of it, also shares an important connection to the experience of the uncanny" (Blanco and Peeren 2013, 396).

or the state of the *falling* is "Clamence's moral and spiritual descent, the result of a lifelong pattern of human noncommitment culminating in his failure to come to the rescue of a woman who had fallen into the Seine" (Sperber 1969, 271).

When this fall happens, life ends and approaches a *final* state. Through the lens of finality, Paris is—to use Tafuri's words as echoed by Agamben—a "cadaver."[4] It is in this definite description of a place as a cadaver that Clamence can describe Paris as "a real trompel'œil, a magnificent stage-setting inhabited by four million silhouettes" (Camus 1956, 5).

Clamence's Parisian life is a paradise before the fall. As he says, "indeed, wasn't that Eden, *cher monsieur*: no intermediary between life and me? Such was my life. I never had to learn how to live. In that regard, I already knew everything at birth" (Camus 1956, 11). But this ideality within the auspices of a blissful state assumes a spectral character in the insisting memory of Clamence. The insistence that operates in this dons the spectral when it forms a life after an ending. Agamben (2013, 475) explicates that "spectrality is a form of life, a posthumous or complementary life that begins only when everything is finished." Such a finished state was ended by Clamence himself when he tries to avoid that irreversible moment of the past in Paris—on that bridge when he was not able to prevent the suicide of the woman. What is dead therefore is not Clamence per se, but the paradise where Clamence previously resides. In that Eden state, his Parisian life becomes final and can now continue to exist—but only as a specter that constantly haunts him. In his final words: "It's too late now. It will always be too late" (Camus 1956, 44). The final specter in Paris makes Clamence avoid it because he cannot do anything about it: "on the bridges of Paris I, too, learned that I was afraid of freedom" (Camus 41). For Agamben, final spectrality or "the first type of spectrality is perfect, since it no longer has anything to add to what it has said or done" (2013, 475).

There are, thus, three elements of final spectrality of a place that is noticeable in its mechanism. First, spectrality becomes final when the space in which it resides is already detached from its actual place. Clamence's leaving Paris ends his life there. However, the element of retrospection makes it possible for the place to ruminate and disturb Clamence's life. The place, as it were, albeit no longer there, acquires a spatial function in a form of the final specter. Second, the description of Clamence's end as further illustrated by falling necessitates perspectives of its own: the space in which this falling happens transgresses into place, the woman, and subjectivity. Final spectrality here operates not on one ending, but many endings: Clamence leaving Paris, his leaving the woman dying on the bridge, and his leaving this experience by burying it in his memory. Third, spectrality becomes final when all of these transgressions are put together into the appearance of place, in which case, Paris. This is because the specter has to assume some form and has to use this for retrospection. Paris represents the space where many falls happen, so that these three elements come about in a roundabout way: it begins with acknowledging the end of Parisian life, its sceneries and actual places, allows the experience of falling, and recaptures all these together in a singular spectral space.

[4] Venice is a cadaver as "evoked by Tafuri at the end of his inaugural address" (Agamben 2013).

## Amsterdam, Pretending, and Larval Spectrality

However, in avoiding the final specter in Paris, Clamence again puts himself in a new hell or a place with a new specter. And Clamence is drawn into it as he sees generosity in living with the dead, since "with them there is no obligation" (Camus 1956, 13). In Amsterdam, where he fell, there haunts a new specter. Clamence's rhetoric situate this new place: "Have you noticed that Amsterdam's concentric canals resemble the circles of hell?" Then he clarifies that it is "the middle-class hell, of course, peopled with bad dreams" (Camus 1956, 7–8). He proceeds to describe his position later about Dante's *Inferno* where "Dante accepts the idea of neutral angels in the quarrel between God and Satan. And he puts them in Limbo, a sort of vestibule of his Hell" only to say that "we are in the vestibule" (Camus 1956, 27).[5]

The irresistible act of being drawn by the specter, in Agamben's words, is paradoxically and "precisely why the dead are perhaps the most demanding objects of love. We are defenseless and delinquent with respect to the dead; we flee from and neglect them" (2013, 474). In trying to deviate from the final specter in Paris, he meets a new one in Mexico City, "the seediest bar in the seediest section of the seedy inner circle of Amsterdam" (Solomon 2004, 41). But even if Clamence "resides in the historically rich city of Amsterdam…in the course of his monologue," he eventually sees it as "a soggy hell" where "everything horizontal, no relief; space is colorless, and life dead. Is it not universal obliteration, everlasting nothingness made visible?" (Duvall 2005, 140).

The spectral element in his descent to Amsterdam lies in the eventual "auditory hallucinations (of voice coming from the water) 3 years later" (Sperber 1969, 271). And Clamence cannot hide the haunting in his description of the place: "Amsterdam? A beautiful city, isn't it? Fascinating? There's an adjective I haven't heard in some time. Not since leaving Paris, in fact, years ago. But the heart has its own memory and I have forgotten nothing of our beautiful capital [Paris]" (Camus 1956, 5). Paris, says Clamence, "is far; Paris is beautiful; I haven't forgotten it. I remember its twilights at about this same season. Evening falls, dry and rustling, over the roofs blue with smoke, the city rumbles, the river seems to flow backward" (Camus 1956, 36).

This, for Agamben (2013, 475), is "another type of spectrality that we may call *larval*, which is born from not accepting its own condition, from forgetting it so as to *pretend* at all costs that it still has bodily weight and flesh." If the final specter no longer needs further addition, "the larval specters must *pretend* to have a future in order to clear a space for some torment from their own past, for their own incapacity to comprehend that they have, indeed, reached completion" (Agamben, 475). In this sense, "Clamence longs for the innocence of the past, for the blue Mediterranean—which Camus himself loves so passionately—for Paris at dusk, for places of bliss" (Stourzh 1961, 47). Clamence says, "I realized definitively that I was not cured, that I was still cornered and that I had to make shift with it. Ended the glorious life, but

[5] Incidentally, this also reflects how William Blake used Dante's *Inferno* to expose vestiges in mirroring the coordinates of his own reality. See Panossian (2019).

ended also the frenzy … I had to submit and admit my guilt" (Camus 1956, 34). For Solomon, Clamence "describes his superiority through innocence in his earlier Parisian life, and he goes on to demonstrate it through his protestations of guilt in the seedy setting of the Mexico City bar in the bowels of Amsterdam" (2004, 41). The larval spectrality in Amsterdam "quivers and hums and whispers in its own special way, so we can eventually come to understand and decipher it" (Agamben, 475). Those who reside in the place "attain a certain familiarity with this specter. It suddenly appears during a nocturnal stroll when crossing a bridge" (Agamben, 473). Clamence's gaze in this larval state "turns a corner alongside a canal immersed in shadows, as a glimmer of orange light is switched on in a distant window, and an observing passerby on another bridge holds out a fogged-up mirror" (Agamben, 474).

Seeing how larval the specter in Amsterdam cannot be avoided, Clamence begins to see life in it. He learns to live with its larval condition. After all, as de Certeau (1984, 108) points out, "haunted places are the only ones people can live in." This stance makes Clamence "at home at Mexico City." In illustrating a life of living with specters, *The Fall* accentuates that spectrality functions as a quotidian practice. However, the true essence of a spectral life subsists in the non-acknowledgment of its deadness. In explicating how Venice assumes its spectrality, for instance, Agamben writes: "But the specter of Venice knows nothing of any of this. It no longer appears to the Venetians or, of course, to the tourists" (2013, 476). Instead, the specter appears to vagabonds "who are chased away by brazen administrators, or to rats who anxiously cross from lane to lane with their muzzles to the ground, or to those rare people who, like exiles, try to lucubrate on this often avoided lesson" (Agamben, 476). In this sense, Clamence, with his exilic existence, precisely acquires the lens to spot the larval specters who live among everyone and everywhere. Says Clamence, "I am one of the few people, on the other hand, who can show you what really matters here" (Camus 1956, 24). This lens or specific visual prowess ubiquitously acknowledging specters extends to a cultural universality in the contemporary world (Kahambing, 2020b), which covers all places since "there is no place that is not haunted" (de Certeau 1984, 108). For Agamben, such lens—covered in spectral-coated spectacles—extends to "all peoples and all languages, all orders and all institutions, all parliaments and all sovereigns, the churches and the synagogues" (2013, 476).

The novel then goes deeper into the spectral realm where there is no more escape since all places "have slipped one after another, inexorably, into a larval condition, though they are unprepared for and unconscious of it" (Agamben 2013, 476). This is why Clamence finds in Amsterdam a life: "So I have been practicing my useful profession at Mexico City for some time" (Camus 1956, 42). He accepts and even takes it as his happiness to live with its larval condition: "You'll find me unchanged. And why should I change, since I have found the happiness that suits me? I have accepted duplicity instead of being upset" (Camus 1956, 42). His subsequent life in Amsterdam "as a 'judge-penitent,' much of which is taken up with re-describing and re-interpreting his prior life in Paris" is one such acceptance (Solomon 2004, 45). Proleptically, the final spectrality of Paris reaches Amsterdam so that it further complements the *prefiguring* of Amsterdam's larval condition. With the spectrality

of Amsterdam, it is also as if Paris regains its life in the former's "dark jade canals under the little snow-covered bridges" (Camus 1956, 43).

## Conclusion

Through the acknowledgment of final and larval spectrality, the novel itself becomes a text that haunts in the sense that it "prompts readers to reflect on themselves, their motivations and commitments, their relationships with others, and the very process of reflection itself" (Roberts 2008, 275). And just as possession functions as a direct influence on someone, Clamence exemplifies in *The Fall* a life that is at once final and larval, actively insisting on the lingering presence and absence of anyone's continuing dead state. As he says: "after having solemnly paid my respects to freedom, I decided on the sly that it had to be handed over without delay to anyone who comes along. And every time I can, I preach in my church of Mexico City" (Camus 1956, 41). But the specter works everywhere, so that the modality of this haunting goes beyond the place: "Ordinarily, my offices are at Mexico City. But real vocations are carried beyond the place of work. Even in bed, even with a fever, I am functioning" (Camus 1956, 40). The novel, therefore, offers an uncanny perspective for readers to acknowledge the specters that Clamence preaches, whose places reflect as well their specific positions in life. This is because, in Agamben's words, "Our time is not new [*nuovo*] but last [*novissimo*], that is to say, final and larval" (2013, 476).

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