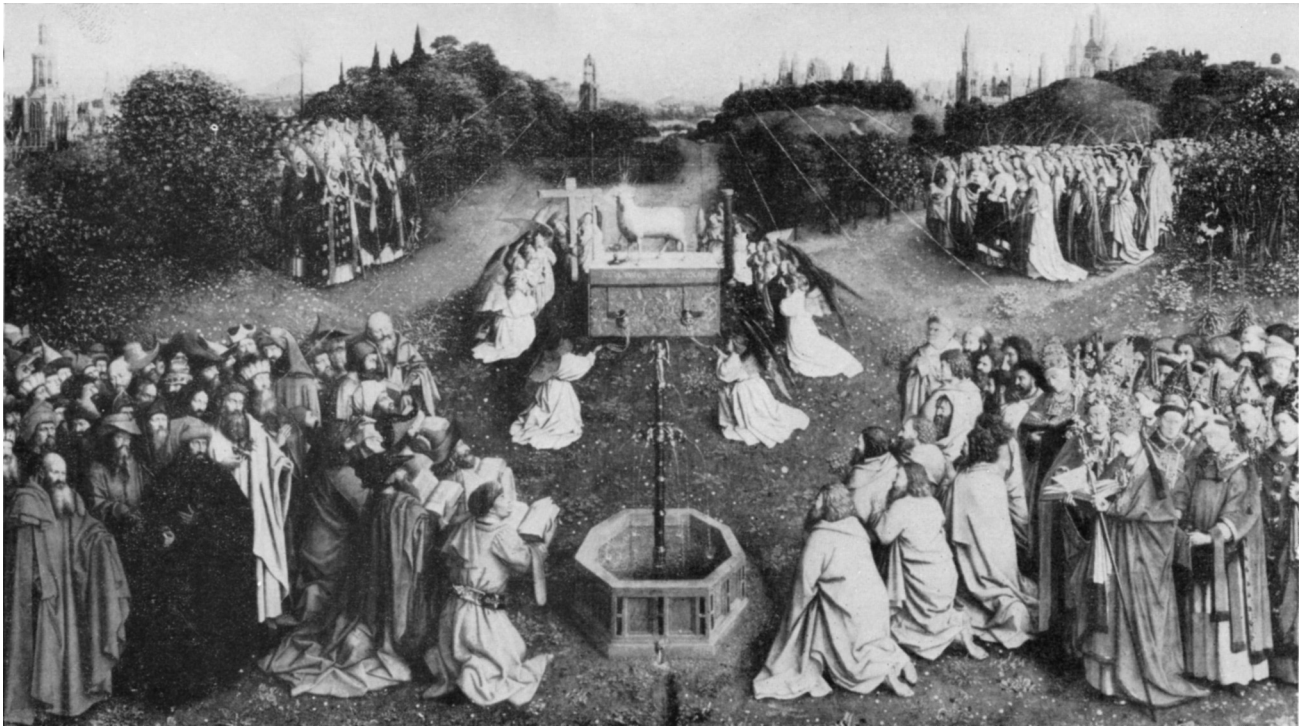

Van Eyck: *Adoration of the Lamb* from *The Ghent Altarpiece*. Reproduced here.

ALBERT CAMUS

Camus' The Fall: The Icarus Complex

The Icarus complex consists of a cluster of interrelated variables of personality which were first described by Henry A. Murray. It was named after Icarus, despite the fact that some significant components of the syndrome do not appear in the character of Icarus as the legend is recounted by Ovid. Murray defined the Icarus complex as a compound of: (1) cynosural narcissism, (2) ascensionism combined with (3) the prospection of falling, (4) the cathection of fire and, if enuresis or incontinence persisted in childhood, with (5) an abundance of water imagery. As a consequence of this complex, one often finds (6) a craving for immortality (reascension) as well as (7) a conception of woman as an object to be used for narcissistic gains.[1]

The paper examines Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the hero of Camus' *The Fall,* in the light of the syndrome proposed by Murray.[2] It is hoped that certain puzzling metaphors and the unusual juxtapositions of Camus' novel may be clarified by applying Murray's designations, and thereby enhance our understanding of the wholeness of imaginative conception of Camus as a writer.

Icarian Imagery: Ascensionism and the Prospection of Falling

Murray's concept of *corporeal ascensionism* refers to an extravagant human disposition to overcome gravity: a child's desire to stand erect, to walk without support, etc. It can be expressed in fantasies of rising, flying, or floating in the air. Ascension includes a marked fondness for high objects and places (tall

[1] Murray, Henry A. "American Icarus," in *Clinical Studies of Personality.* A. Burton and R. W. Harris. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), Vol. II, pp. 615-641.

[2] Camus, Albert. *The Fall.* Transl. by J. O'Brien. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957. The present paper may be considered complementary to Barchilon's analysis which, although germinative, leaves certain areas unexplored. See Barchilon, J. "The Fall by Albert Camus: A Psychoanalytic Study." *Int. J. Pschyo-Anal.,* 49:386, 1968.

people, trees, mountains). *Social ascensionism* is manifested in the wish to achieve spectacular rise in social status. These terms may be distinguished from *spiritual ascensionism* which refers to the desire to attain heights of intuitive and prophetic understanding and of the prophetic psychic power to reach an over-all view of things and to forsee the future.

"Falling" denotes an undesired, unpreventable, or accidental descension of something [usually a human body or the status (reputation) of a person, but it may be feces, urine or any cathected object]. "Precipitation," on the other hand, refers to a consciously or unconsciously desired calamatous descension. The subject allows himself to fall or leaps from a height (precipitative suicide), or he pushes another person over a cliff.

In Jean-Baptiste Clamence's prelapsarian state his wishes for social ascensionism were gratified. He says: "I literally soared for a period of years. . . . My profession satisfied most happily that vocation for summits." As a successful Parisian lawyer, for example, he was offered the Legion of Honor three times. "The avidity which in our society substitutes for ambition has always made me laugh. I was aiming higher; you will see that the expression is exact in my case." [3] And exact it is. In subsequent passages, we see not only his predilection for height (corporeal ascensionism) but his abhorrence, which is almost phobic, of caves, all low climes, and non-elevated occupations.[4] "Let's pause on these heights. Now you understand what I meant when I spoke of aiming higher. I was talking, it so happens, of those supreme summits, the only places I can really live. Yes, I have never felt comfortable except in lofty places. Even in the details of daily life, I needed to feel *above*. I preferred the bus to the subway, open carriages

[3] Camus, Albert. *The Fall*, pp. 29, 25, 20.

[4] He rationalizes his non-participation in the resistance on the basis of this disaffection. "I think especially that underground actions suited neither my temperament nor my preference for exposed heights. It seemed to me that I was being asked to do some weaving in a cellar, for days and nights on end, until some brute should come to haul me from hiding, undo my weaving, and then drag me to another cellar to beat me to death. I admired those who indulged in such heroism of the depths, but couldn't imitate them." *Ibid.*, p. 122.

It is interesting to note that the panel "Just Judges" from "The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb" shows the presence of a cave in the background, and the individual who stole this panel is described as a caveman, by Clamence. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

to taxis, terraces to closed-in places. An enthusiast for sport planes in which one's head is in the open, on boats I was the eternal pacer of the top deck. In the mountains I used to flee the deep valleys for the passes and plateaus; I was the man of the mesas at least. If fate had forced me to choose between work at a lathe or as a roofer, don't worry I'd have chosen the roofs and become acquainted with dizziness. Coal bins ships' holds, undergrounds, grottoes, pits were repulsive to me. I had even developed a special loathing for speleologists, who had the nerve to fill the front page of our newspapers, and whose records nauseated me. Striving to reach elevation minus 800 at the risk of getting one's head caught in a rocky funnel (a siphon, as those fools say!), seems to me the exploit of perverted or traumatized characters. There was something criminal underlying it . . . in my opinion no one meditated in cellars or prison cells (unless they were situated in a tower with a broad view)." [5]

Clamence's fall from his lofty position as defender of the orphan and the widow to that of legal consultant for the pimps, pederasts, and thieves in a seamy Amsterdam tourist trap, the "Mexico City" bar, is all the more of a disaster considering his ambitious strivings, his desire for power, and great need for narcissistic gratification. The novel documents 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. Clamence experiences an intolerable sense of guilt subsequent to the woman's fall, which eventuates in auditory hallucinations (of a voice coming from the water) three years later. His attempts to deal with the guilt are varied, and restitution occurs only when he finally evolves the complex role of "judge-penitent." "Once more I have found a height to which I am the only one to climb." When he proselytizes at the "Mexico City" bar, his fantasies for reascension are so intense that he feels like a deity (spiritual ascensionism): "Then I grow taller, *très cher*, I grow taller, I breathe freely, I am on the mountain, the plain stretches before my eyes. How intoxicating to feel like God the Father and to hand out definitive testimonials of bad

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 23-25.

character and habits. I sit enthroned among my bad angels at the summit of the Dutch heaven and I watch ascending toward me, as they issue from the fogs and the water, the multitude of the Last Judgment. They rise slowly . . . above all, I feel at last that I am being adored! " [6]

Another expression of Clamence's ascensionistic strivings can be noted in his preoccupation with, and frequent allusion to doves: " the sky is alive? You are right, *cher ami.* It thickens, becomes concave, opens up air shafts and closes cloudy doors. Those are the doves. Haven't you noticed that the sky of Holland is filled with millions of doves, invisible because of their altitude, which flap their wings, rise or fall in unison, filling the heavenly space with dense multitudes of grayish feathers carried hither and thither by the wind? The doves wait up there all year round. They wheel above the earth, look down, and would like to come down. But there is nothing but the sea and the canals, roofs covered with shop signs, and never a head on which to light." Later that day, the doves are still hovering: " look, the doves are gathering up there. They are crowding against one another, hardly stirring, and the light is waning." The following day: " Don't you hear the cries of invisible gulls? " Towards the end of the novel, Clamence confines himself to quarters (at times he thinks he has malaria): " How could I remain in bed like a good patient? " he asks. " I must be higher than you, and my thoughts lift me up. On such nights, or such mornings rather for the fall occurs at dawn), I go out and walk briskly along the canals. In the livid sky the layers of feathers become thinner, the doves move a little higher, and above the roofs a rosy light announces a new day of my creation."

Finally, when he develops a *modus vivendi* with his intolerable guilt, by assuming the penitent judge's role, he watches the snow fall, and fantasizes the doves descend. In his mind it seems to place the city in a state of grace, transforming it from the Dantesque inferno: " Look it's falling! Oh, I must go out! Amsterdam asleep in the white snow, the dark jade canals under the little snow-covered bridges, the empty streets, my muffled steps—there will be purity, even if fleeting, before

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

tomorrow's mud. See the huge flakes drifting against the window panes. It must be doves, surely. They finally make up their minds to come down, the little dears; they are covering the waters and the roofs with a thick layer of feathers; they are fluttering at every window." [7]

Cynosural Narcissism

This term, broader and more embracing than exhibitionism, is used by Murray to denote a craving for a monopoly of unsolicited attention and admiration, a desire to attract and enchant all eyes, as the North Star (*Kynosoura*) does. The Icarian's wish is that his mere appearance (*cynosural presence*), or some startling exploit (*cynosural act*) or some moving or memorable statement (*cynosural word*) will draw all eyes. (The variable is not mentioned in the myth of Icarus, but its occurrence can be plausibly inferred, according to Murray.)

Clamence's profession as lawyer to the widow and the orphan allowed him cynosural presence, for it "satisfied most happily that vocation for summits. . . . After all," he says, "living aloft is still the only way of being seen and hailed by the largest number." Thus, we see the interrelation, in Clamence's mind, of heights, and narcissism. It is difficult for him to suppose that others are not similarly oriented. The murderers he defended, "like many men . . . had no longer been able to endure anonymity, and that impatience had contributed to leading them to unfortunate extremities." In defending them, he felt his own fame increase (cynosural act and word), since these criminals had achieved a degree of notoriety, which allowed him an avenue "to becoming really well known, at the same time and in the same places, but by more economical means." [8] Clamence thinks of himself as the center of the universe. "I have to admit humbly, *mon cher compatriote*, I was always bursting with vanity. I, I, I is the refrain of my whole life which could be heard in every thing I said. I could never talk without boasting." [9] His libido is reflected upon himself:

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 96, 109, 143-144, 145.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 26.
[9] *Ibid.* Murray's analysis of Merrill Moore's poetry indicates the presence of Icarian elements. Murray, Henry A. *Notes on the Icarus Syndrome. Folia*

" My emotional impulses always turn towards me, my feelings of pity concern me. It is not true, after all, that I have never loved. I conceived at least one great love in my life, of which I was always the object." [10]

Fire and Water

The Icarian individual tends to perceive sex in urinary rather than in genital terms, and manifests the other concommitants of urethral erotism as defined by Freud:[11] cathection of fire, " burning " ambition, exhibitionism, and voyeurism.

Murray says that the occurrence of incontinence or enuresis in the childhood of an Icarian is likely to result in an abundance of water imagery in subsequent dreams and fantasies (falling water or falling of a body into water).[12] One notes in Jean-Baptiste Clemence's fantasies, the interrelatedness of corporeal ascensionism, cathection of fire and watery imagery.[13] " Thus," he says, " an ideal vantage point would be a

Psychiat. Neerl. 61:42, 1958. The last stanza of one of Moore's poems entitled ' Ego " invites comparison with Clamence's words:

" O Ego.
Another's story tires me
Any other story tires me,
I am anxious to hear my story.
Ego
Ego
Ego."

In fact, the only words spoken in this novel are those of Clamence's, and while the novel is in the form of a dialogue, it is, in essence, a narrative monologue. Clamence's tale corresponds quite well, with the following description by Murray of the Icarian:

" Much the greater part of the subject's imaginations (not to speak of his conversations) are about himself, dwelling sometimes on his disabilities and failures, but more characteristically, in his better moods and seasons, being molded into glorious hopeful pictures of achievement and fulfillment." (*Ibid.*, p. 140.)

[10] *The Fall*, p. 23.

[11] Freud called attention to the close relationship between fire and water: " It is as if primitive man had the impulse, when he came in contact with fire, to gratify an infantile pleasure in respect to it and put it out with a stream of urine. Whoever was the first to deny himself this pleasure and spare the fire was able to take it with him. This great cultural victory was thus a reward for refraining from gratification of an instinct. Freud, S. (1932 [1931] *Acquisition and Control of Fire*, Standard Edition, 22:183-193). The association is also evident in *Daniel* 7:10 where we read that a fiery stream came forth from the Ancient of Days as he sat upon his throne in judgment.

[12] A prime example of a fall into water is, of course, that of the woman in black from the Pont Royale. *The Fall*, p. 23.

[13] It is of interest to note that on the night of St. John the Baptist's Day (June 24th), fires are lit to ward off sickness and ill luck. Perhaps the custom

natural balcony 1500 feet above the sea still visible bathed in sunlight." Another example of this triadic fusion of the elements is present in his choice of favorite country: "What I like most in the world is Sicily, you see, and especially from the top of Mount Etna in the sunlight, provided I dominate the island and the sea." [14] The connection, in Clamence's mind, of the ascensional theme with cathection of fire is noted when he states: "I could readily understand why sermons, decisive preachings and fire miracles took place on accessible heights." [15] It is present when he says "At every hour of the day, within myself and others, I would scale the heights and light conspicuous fires." [16]

A final example of the interrelationship of social ascensionism with lure of fire is evident when Clamence describes moments when "I felt like a king's son or a burning bush." [17]

The themes of descension, reascension and fire are also evident when, in seeing a snowfall, Clamence likens the snow to doves and muses: "they finally make up their minds to come down, the little dears; they are covering the waters and the roofs with a thick layer of feathers; they are fluttering at every window . . . come now, admit you would be flabbergasted

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derives from the Biblical passage in which John the Baptist says: "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance; but He that cometh after me is mightier than I . . . He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire." *Matthew*, 3:11.

[14] In a lecture given at the University of Uppsala in 1957, Camus remarked: "It is said that Nietzsche after the break with Lou Salomé, in a period of complete solitude, crushed and uplifted at the same time by the perspective of the huge work he had to carry on without any help, used to walk at night on the mountains overlooking the Gulf of Genoa and light great bonfires of leaves and branches which he would watch as they burned." Camus further remarked: "I have often dreamed of those fires and have occasionally imagined certain men and certain works in front of those fires, as a way of testing men and works." Camus, Albert. *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death.* N. Y., Random House, 1960, "Create Dangerously," p. 208.

[15] *The Fall*, p. 23. See also footnote 18.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 24. Murray reports that an Icarian patient whom he studied had a fantasy in which there was an interdependence of the same two themes: "I am just biding my time," the patient stated, "and waiting for the day when my 'soul' will ignite and this inner fire will send me hurtling (two rungs at a time) up the ladder of success." Murray, H. A. in *Clinical Studies, op. cit.*, p. 633.

[17] *The Fall*, p. 30. Of interest in the context of this paper is that Moses perceived the burning bush on the mountain of God (Horeb), and that the Angel of the Lord appeared in a flame of fire in the midst of the bush. *Exodus* 3:2-12.

if a chariot came down from heaven to carry me off, or the snow suddenly caught fire." [18]

Depreciation of Women

The Icarian individual conceives of women as objects to be used for narcissistic gains. Women merely exist to serve man as amazed spectators of his powers and as bearers of his sons or to mourn his death. Murray considers that this characteristic is usually accompanied by bisexuality. He feels that these traits are less salient components of the Icarus complex.

Clamence's enormous narcissism has already been noted. It is little wonder, then, that he was able to give of himself to women in only the most superficial way: "For more than thirty years I have been in love exclusively with myself. What hope was there of losing such a habit! I didn't lose it and remained a trifler in passion."

Elsewhere, he speaks of the superficiality of his heterosexual relations. "You must know that I always succeeded with women—and without much effort. I don't say succeed in making them happy or in even making myself happy through them. No, simply succeed. I used to achieve my ends just about whenever I wanted . . . I loved them, according to their hallowed expression, which amounts to saying that I never loved any of them . . . I made use of them more often than I served them."

It seems the only condition in which he felt comfortable was one in which women played the role of lifeless creatures whose sole *raison d'être* would be to adore him! "I could live happily only on condition that all individuals on earth, or the greatest possible number, would turn toward me, eternally in suspense, devoid of independent life and ready to answer my call at any moment, doomed in short to sterility until the day I should deign to favor them. In short, for me to live happily it was essential for the creatures I chose not to live at all. They

[18] Camus, Albert. *The Fall*, p. 30. Murray, in describing the Icarian mind, states that it "turns readily and flexibly to imaginations which are generally, in some respects unusual, original, surprising, child-like, far-fetched, expansive, or bizarre." This passage, as well as the one in which Clamence compares himself to a king's son, or a burning bush, are cases in point. Murray's depiction of the Icarian personality as being "multiple, fluent, diffuse, unconventional and extravagant" applies to Clamence equally well. Murray, H. A. *Notes on the Icarus Syndrome*, p. 141.

must receive their life's breath, sporadically, only at my bidding."

His emotional relations with men reached no greater depth: " I say my friends . . . as a convention . . . I have no more friends. I have nothing but accomplices." Moreover, there are overtones of bisexuality, as when Clamence asks his interlocutor: " Do you know Greece? No? . . . What should we do there, I ask you? There one has to be pure in heart. Do you know that there male friends walk along the street in pairs holding hands? Yes, the women stay home and you often see a middle-aged, respectable man, sporting mustaches, gravely striding along the sidewalk, his fingers locked in those of his friend's . . . but tell me, would you take my hand in the streets of Paris? Oh, I'm joking. *We* have a sense of decorum." [19]

Craving for Immortality

The narcissistic core in every man yearns for perpetual existence, according to Murray. But this yearning is accentuated in the Icarian. This accentuation is clearly manifested by Clamence when he says: " I never ceased wanting to be immortal. Wasn't this the key to my nature and also a result of the great self-love I have told you about? Yes, I was bursting with a longing to be immortal." And elsewhere he states: " I love life—that's my real weakness. I love it so much that I am incapable of imagining what is not life."

Murray says that the Icarian, in his avoidance of mortality, fantasies of the resurrection of the body or the soul, or of " replication." This, Murray defines as the process whereby one or more persons are transformed in the image of the subject. This implanting of a memorable and impelling image of the self in the minds of others with the desire to triumph over death is seen in Clamence's fantasy when he imagines that he will be arrested for the theft of the " Just Judges." " I would be decapitated for instance, and I'd have no more fear of death; I'd be saved. Above the gathered crowd, you would hold up my still warm head, so that they would recognize themselves in it and I could again dominate—an exemplar." [20]

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[20] *The Fall*, pp. 100, 56, 68, 73, 98, 2, 76, 146. In describing the Icarian personality, Murray states: " It is necessary that he ' stand out ' a unique person,

Van Eyck's "The Adoration of the Lamb"

Van Eyck's polyptych *The Ghent Altarpiece*, plays a central role in the book.[21] The stolen section in Clamence's possession, the "Just Judges," was once the opposite of the external panel depicting "John the Baptist." The polyptych as a whole was once called "Adam and Eve," a title emphasizing the doctrinal importance of the Fall of Man in the work.

There are two depictions of John the Baptist in the polyptych. The outer one is a statuesque *grisaille*. St. John is depicted as cold and nonhuman, but carries in his arm a lamb, and one thinks of the prelapsarian Clamence: nonchalant and detached, yet caring for society's shorn lambs, the widow and the orphan. On the interior surface of the retable, St. John is portrayed as gaunt, emaciated, and haggard, much the same as one imagines Clamence in the fifth day of "dialogue" with his lawyer friend.[22] The two different renditions of St. John in the painting parallel other dual aspects of Clamence's character: his role as "judge-penitent," as "king's son or a burning bush," as "the double face, the charming Janus,"[23] and when he acknowledges: "I have accepted duplicity instead of being upset about it."

The central lower panel, "Adoration of the Lamb," presents in the foreground the Fountain of Life and jets of water flow from winged angels, an angel at the summit, as well as from winged gargoyles; the overflow from the fountain forms a rivulet which runs toward the front of the painting. In the rear of the fountain is the altar, upon which stands the Lamb; a jet of blood is directed from the Lamb's jugular into a chalice on the altar. Through an opening between the wooded heights of the background, a river is seen winding towards the right from mountains in the far off distance. Surrounding the altar are fourteen winged angels, bringing offerings to the Lamb,

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that he startle, surprise, astonish, amuse, enchant or enthrall others, that he leave in their minds an enduring imprint of the spectacle of himself." *Notes on the Icarus Syndrome*, p. 141.

[21] I am supplying information about the painting which further contributes to the understanding of Clamence. The painting is not thoroughly described in Camus' novel.

[22] Above St. John in this panel is the inscription: "This is John The Baptist, greater than man, equal to the angels . . . the lamp of the world . . ."

[23] *The Fall*, p. 47.

and two angels are swinging their censors which hover in anti-gravity position.

Across the back of the throne of God the Father is a brocaded cloth of honor which shows a nest in which a pelican is billing its breast, the blood falling on its young. Overhead, the Holy Spirit Dove hovers, and emanating from the Dove are fiery rays, which extend to the foreground of the painting.

The Dove is also evident in The Annunciation, and the winged Angel, Gabriel, is also present in an outer panel. In the panel to the Archangel Gabriel's left, more birds are in flight, and a tower is present in the background. Numerous birds are flying above the figures in the panels of the "Holy Hermits" and "Holy Pilgrims." Among those above the Hermits is a flock of cranes. In the painting then, we note the presence of winged creatures (doves, gargoyle, cranes, pelicans, and angels),[24] lofty towers, ascent and descent of water and descent of blood, and over all, a fiery, Holy Dove. This, then, is a painting with elements which would have great appeal to Clamence in terms of the Icarian elements in his personality.

Summary

Henry Murray described a syndrome of personological traits which he designated Icarian.

This paper calls attention to certain Icarian elements in the imagery of Camus' *The Fall* and in the hero's personality.

It should not be construed that Clamence is only an Icarian. He is portrayed as a most complex, urbane, highly cultured individual who draws analogies from medicine, art, literature, religion, and zoology. To reduce him to a syndrome would be to miss much of the richness of the characterization.

The novel is a parable, and Clamence is used as an instrument of the author to explore man's current moral and spiritual predicament.

It is a tribute to Camus' intuitive understanding that his protagonist is a recognizable psychological type. Clamence's

[24] Avian creatures have symbolic significance in Christian iconography. Thus, e. g., the pelican represents Christ, and the Dove, the Holy Spirit. See Evans, E. P. *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture,* Wm. Heinemann, London, 1896, p. 128. Icarian elements are present, then, in symbol as well as on surface in Van Eyck's painting.

associations, fantasies, and preoccupations have internal consistency, and by relating them to Murray's syndrome, it is hoped that certain puzzling metaphors and unusual juxtapositions may become more comprehensible.

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