

A Book Review

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THE FALL, by Albert Camus, translated from the French (*La Chute*) by Justin O'Brien, Alfred A. Knopf, 147 pages. \$3.00.

“I HAD already gone some fifty yards when I heard the sound . . . of a body striking the water. . . . Almost at once I heard a cry, repeated several times, which was going downstream; then it suddenly ceased. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable.”

Albert Camus in his latest work has woven an intriguing tale around the above passage. The incident, which is related at the middle of his *novella*, is constantly hinted at in the first half of the book and becomes the central event of the narrative thereafter. The whole work, though one long monologue, is far from monotonous. The protagonist, Jean-Baptiste, reminisces on the movement of his life from that of a successful Parisian lawyer to a “judge-penitent” in a seaside bar in Amsterdam—where he accosts the reader. But no matter how far he rambles, the drowning cry continues to haunt him to the last page.

According to the epigraph of the book, Jean-Baptiste “is the aggregate of the vices of our whole generation in their fullest expression,” and through his peculiar profession as judge-penitent we come to share his introspection into those vices. Ineluctably we are drawn into the web of his “fall.” The resulting portrait of ourselves and of our time is perhaps the best such portrait we have. It seems impossible that the reader will not know himself and his situation far better after experiencing the self-scrutiny which the book evokes.

Is there a way out? In this slim volume none is explicitly propounded. Certainly the “answer” which Jean-Baptiste admits to finding is really only an extreme and subtle form of his ever-recurring vice. Symbols there are in profusion, and hints of answers which we may find in future works (the most obvious symbol is, of course, the name of the protagonist—John the Baptist—the fore-runner). The hint to which the author himself has pointed is: “if only one could forget oneself a minute for someone else.”

But if and when M. Camus gives us his solution to the human predicament, he will have moved beyond the limits of existentialist analysis. The kind of profound description of man so evident in this book is the heart and genius of existentialist thought. Too often the movement has been criticised because of the unacceptability of its answers, or because no answers are given at all. But a movement must be judged at its center, and the existentialist zeal for an adequate redefinition of man as man (aside from and in opposition to all of the dehumanizing systems) must be finally judged as a quest of utmost

importance. And this anthropological method must always be judged independently of the answers which can never be more than partly derived from it. So, too, must a book be judged upon the accomplishment of its purpose. *The Fall*—seen as the analysis of the human predicament today—will remain ultimately valid regardless of the truth of any forthcoming answers from the same pen.

As can be expected from a mind of the stature of M. Camus', there are brilliant flashes of insight into many and varied subjects throughout the book. Many of these cry out for quotation here, but let us be satisfied with only one: "You have heard, of course, of those tiny fish in the rivers of Brazil that attack the unwary swimmer by thousands and with swift little nibbles clean him up in a few minutes, leaving only an immaculate skeleton? Well, that's what . . . (the) organization is. 'Do you want a good clean life? Like everybody else?' You say yes, of course. How can one say no? 'O. K. You'll be cleaned up. Here's a job, a family, and organized leisure activities.' And the little teeth attack the flesh, right down to the bone."

There can be little doubt that *The Fall* is a moving book which possibly may affect our whole generation's conception of itself. Let us look forward to the solutions which M. Camus may give us, but not overlook the fact that here is a painting of the human condition in which posterity may find a classic meaning.

"Then please tell me what happened to you one night on the quays of the Seine and how you managed never to risk your life."

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Since the writing of the above, Albert Camus has been awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize for literature. The citation was for "his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times." All of his work that has been translated into English has dealt with this theme. The two previous novels, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, probed the crisis-situation in the individual and in society. The philosophical essays, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, analyzed the concepts of suicide and murder, of meaninglessness and revolt.

Much comment has been made on the fact that M. Camus was awarded the high honor in mid-career and at forty-three years of age. But the timing of the Prize by the Swedish Academy may have been intentional. When in the future he moves from diagnosis to remedy, none can tell how effective his wisdom will be. But there is now no doubt as to the greatness of these early analytical probings into problems facing the man of today.