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The Violence of Modernity

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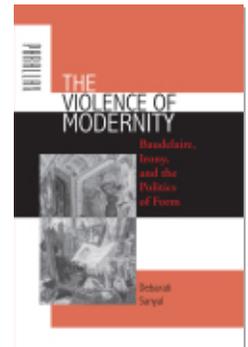
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Broken Engagements

Albert Camus and the Poetics of Terror

J'ai essayé plus d'une fois, comme tous mes amis, de m'enfermer dans un système pour y prêcher à mon aise. Mais un système est une espèce de damnation qui nous pousse à une abjuration perpétuelle. Baudelaire, "Exposition universelle (1855)"

Je ne suis pas un philosophe. Je ne crois pas assez à la raison pour croire à un système.

Camus, interview in *Servir*, December 20, 1945

In his youth in Oran, Algeria, Albert Camus recited Baudelaire's prose poem "L'Étranger," alternating voices with a friend:

- « Qui aimes tu le mieux, homme énigmatique, dis ? Ton père, ta mère, ta soeur, ou ton frère ?
 —Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni soeur, ni frère.
 —Tes amis ?
 —Vous vous servez-là d'une parole dont le sens m'est resté jusqu'à ce jour inconnu.
 —Ta patrie ?
 —J'ignore sous quelle latitude elle est située.
 —La beauté ?
 —Je l'aimerais volontiers, déesse et immortelle.
 —L'or ?
 —Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu.
 —Eh ! Qu'aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire étranger ?
 —J'aime les nuages . . . les nuages qui passent . . . là-bas . . . là-bas . . . les merveilleux nuages ! »

The figure of the *étranger* may have returned to haunt Camus in postwar Paris as he struggled to circumvent the Manichean polarities defining the French intellectual and political landscape.¹ Camus came out of World War II as an exemplary *intellectuel engagé*. He had been editor of the resistance journal

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Combat and wrote *Lettres à un ami allemand* and portions of *La Peste*, his allegory of resistance, under the Nazi occupation. He thus emerged as a guiding moral, political, and literary voice for postwar France. Yet in the decade following France's liberation, Camus's commitment to the absolute value of human life repeatedly pitted him against the political solutions endorsed by the Left. His inability to adopt a course of action in which the end justified the means alienated him from his allies and friends on more than one occasion. In the matter of the postwar purges, for instance, Camus's initial support gave way to disgust and fear that the *épuration* of collaborators was perpetuating the spirit of Nazi eliminationism.² Camus's rupture with Sartre and his subsequent alienation from the intellectual circles of *Les Temps modernes* also occurred over a question of ends and means, when he denounced Marxist messianic violence in *L'Homme révolté* and called into question the French Left's political ideal. And to this day, Camus's ambivalence about an independent Algeria—in part because of his refusal to legitimate the FLN's terrorist tactics and its toll on French Algerians—brands him as an apologist for French colonialism, or at the very least, as an idealist who eschewed the moral compromises of political praxis.³ As Sartre put it in his ambiguous *hommage* to his erstwhile friend after his death in a car accident, “Son humanisme têtu, étroit et pur, austère et sensuel, livrait un combat douteux contre les événements massifs et difformes de ce temps. . . . Son silence même, ces dernières années, avait un aspect positif : ce cartésien de l'absurde refusait de quitter le sûr terrain de la moralité pour s'engager dans les chemins incertains de la *pratique*” (*Sit.*, 4: 127). Camus's ambivalence about the politics of his time has contributed to his lasting canonization as a *clerc* who refused to tread the muddy paths of praxis and plunge his hands into the “shit and blood” of history.⁴

While it may seem paradoxical to conclude a study of Baudelaire, the exemplary *poète dépolitiqué*, with a reading of Camus, the postwar *intellectuel engagé*, it is nevertheless a fitting end to this book's broader exploration of irony as resistance to the violence of modernity. Indeed, upon closer scrutiny, several striking similarities emerge in these authors' critiques of modern experience and analyses of the connections between literature, history, and terror. Although inhabiting different historical junctures, both wrote in the aftermath of great political upheavals (1848 and World War II respectively) and struggled to articulate an oppositional politics and poetics when such positions either risked co-optation by the logic of empire or seemed doomed to irrelevance. For Camus, as for Baudelaire, postrevolutionary secular conceptions of collective identity inaugurated the age of ideology, or what Camus called “les reli-

gions horizontales de notre temps” (*E*, 601). These ideological systems (bourgeois capitalism and imperialism for Baudelaire, modern totalitarianisms of the Left and Right for Camus) were intractably violent, since they were founded on the sacrifice of vulnerable, suffering bodies to an idealized future. Camus’s refusal of abstract solutions to particular historical crises echoes Baudelaire’s rejection of aesthetic and philosophical systems. From Meursault’s *acte gratuit* to the critique of teleological history in *L’Homme révolté*, Camus’s work is a passionate meditation on the limits of theory before the unjustifiable fact of human suffering *and* the unpredictable vitality of human agency. For both authors, secular ideological systems are realized in the world of things as terror, as the sacrifice of living beings to a unified end. Baudelaire’s dictum, “Toute révolution a pour corollaire le massacre des innocents” is echoed, almost a century later in Camus’s indictment of purgative, revolutionary violence. Camus, the postwar humanist—like Baudelaire, the self-proclaimed postrevolutionary anti-humanist—refused the murderous abstraction of philosophical and political progress narratives. Confronted with the particularity of lived experience (and specifically the lived experience of violence), both chose the ambiguous refractions of aesthetic form over the “perpetual abjurations” of philosophy and political theory.

The following pages situate Camus within the legacy of committed ironists examined thus far. I begin with an overview of Camus’s *L’Homme révolté* that attends to a neglected but central aspect of this essay: its meditation on the links between art, history and terror. Camus’s reflection on the overlapping violence of these fields connects him with the authors discussed in the previous chapters and belongs to a long-standing preoccupation with literature’s complicity with other regimes of power. His own position as a committed intellectual wrestling with the dilemmas of postwar French politics provides an exemplary elucidation of irony’s value in a political—as well as aesthetic—exploration of violence.

The Diagnosis of Terror in L’Homme révolté

L’Homme révolté and its critique of contemporary deifications of History constituted an intervention in the heated debate following the disclosures of the Soviet labor camps. When the testimonies and narratives of Arthur Koestler, David Rousset, and Victor Kravchenko were met with cautious silence and skepticism, Camus publicly declared, as early as 1949, his belief that the labor camps were fully entrenched in the Soviet state apparatus.⁵ In the aftermath of

Merleau-Ponty's *Humanisme et terreur* (initially published by Sartre's *Les Temps modernes* in 1946) and de Beauvoir's *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, essays that contemplated the legitimation of historically specific abuses for the sake of world revolution, *L'Homme révolté* instead called into question the very foundations of the French Left's political ideal.⁶ In such a polarized Cold War context, it is not surprising that Camus's denunciation of the discourse of ends and means should have estranged him from the intellectual circle of *Les Temps modernes*. For his critique did not just target Marxist-Hegelian *doxa*. It became a sweeping denunciation of all utopic political and philosophical forms of messianism—irrespective of their ideological affiliation—that sacrifice living and suffering bodies to their idealized ends. In Camus's account, the French postwar political mentality was still blindly locked into a conceptual legacy built on the historical union of revolution and terror.

The genealogy of the Western revolutionary tradition proposed in *L'Homme révolté* casts the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century as the culmination of one hundred and fifty years of philosophical and political terror, beginning with the French Revolution. For Camus, secular postrevolutionary conceptions of identity and polity deified the individual, and by extension, the body politic, thereby displacing metaphysics with history. This fatal hypostasis of individual and state power inaugurated the age of ideology, the "religions horizontales de notre temps" (*E*, 601). Camus's genealogy of terror thus begins with 1789 and tracks its deployment through nineteenth-century philosophy, political theory, and literary production. In his discussion of historical forms of rebellion, the chapter entitled "La Prophétie bourgeoise" traces a direct line from the technocratic utopias flourishing in Baudelaire's time under Napoléon III's market authoritarianism to the modern police state.

Camus's indictment of the nineteenth-century bourgeois myth of progress echoes Baudelaire's denunciations of modernity's violence. A century earlier, Baudelaire's "Salon de 1846" portrayed the emerging capitalist state as an exquisitely regulated organism in which knowledge, property, science, and political power converged to suppress all forms of dissent: "Vous vous êtes associés, vous avez formé des compagnies et faits des emprunts pour réaliser l'idée de l'avenir avec toutes ses formes diverses, formes politiques, industrielles et artistiques. Vous n'avez jamais en aucune noble entreprise laissé l'initiative à la minorité protestante" (*OC*, 1: 875). By the time of *L'Homme révolté*, Baudelaire's vision of an amoral technocratic society whose ethos of production would be maintained by "des moyens qui feraient frissonner notre humanité actuelle" (*OC*, 1: 666) had been realized in the modern police states of Hitler,

Mussolini, and Stalin. Baudelaire's prophecy of a seamlessly policed social totality finds an uncanny echo in Camus's narrative of the emergence of state terror in the nineteenth century's technocratic utopias:

Une société dont les savants seraient les prêtres, deux milles banquiers et techniciens régnant sur une Europe de cent vingt millions d'habitants où la vie privée serait absolument identifiée avec la vie publique, où une obéissance absolue "d'action, de pensée et de coeur" serait rendue au grand prêtre qui règnerait sur le tout, telle est l'utopie de Comte qui annonce ce qu'on peut appeler les *religions horizontales de notre temps*. Elle est utopique, il est vrai, parce que, convaincu du pouvoir illuminant de la science, il a oublié de prévoir une police. D'autres seront plus pratiques ; et la religion de l'humanité sera fondée, effectivement, mais sur le sang et la douleur des hommes. (*E*, 601; emphasis added)

Camus's genealogy of terror echoes Baudelaire's prophecy. Terror is not only a historical moment and specific consequence of the French Revolution; conceived more broadly, it is an imperial logic of domination that emerged out of the postrevolutionary deification of individual and state power. Modernity's enthronement of history and progress was intractably violent and nihilistic. Its premise was the sacrifice of a vital, immediate, and differentiated social content to a unified future totality. For Camus, dialectical materialism was but another avatar of modernity's political and philosophical messianism. A sweeping, imperialistic, and virtually cannibalistic force, the dialectic's end is the relentless absorption of difference and alterity: "En ce sens, il est juste de remarquer que la dialectique n'est pas et ne peut pas être révolutionnaire. Elle est seulement, selon notre point de vue, nihiliste, pur mouvement qui vise à nier tout ce qui n'est pas lui-même."⁷

The originality of *L'Homme révolté*—one significantly ignored in the ensuing debates—lies in Camus's treatment of violence as a *formal* principle that could be deployed in the distinct fields of philosophy, politics, and aesthetics. Violence erupts when the human desire for unity in a secular world (a central feature of rebellion) manifests itself as a will to totality. Camus's critique of the excesses of rebellion—as revolution and terror—thus fully implicates aesthetic production with political violence: "La révolte . . . est fabricatrice d'univers. Ceci définit l'art aussi. L'exigence de la révolte, à vrai dire, est en partie une exigence esthétique" (*E*, 659). Rebellion and art share an identical desire for unity and build compensatory fictions that contest the dissonance of historical experience. This desire for unity always risks mutating into a will to totality. Tracing the evolution of political messianism from the literary self-

deification of Sade or Baudelaire to the revolutions that gave birth to the modern totalitarian state, Camus proposes that an identical violence animates art, philosophy, and politics. The totalitarian state is a political incarnation of the totalizing *forms* structuring modern Europe's aesthetic and ideological imagination. In this continuum, "l'étrange et terrifiante croissance de l'état moderne" is the historical and material outcome of a metaphors of closure structuring the Western postrevolutionary imaginary:

Toutes les pensées révoltées, nous l'avons vu, s'illustrent dans une rhétorique ou un univers clos. La rhétorique des remparts chez Lucrèce, les couvents et les châteaux verrouillés de Sade, l'île ou le rocher romantique, les cimes solitaires de Nietzsche, l'océan élémentaire de Lautréamont, les parapets de Rimbaud, les châteaux terrifiants qui renaissent, battus par un orage de fleurs, chez les surréalistes, la prison, la nation retranchée, le camp de concentration, l'empire des libres esclaves, illustrent à leur manière le même besoin de cohérence et d'unité. Sur ces mondes fermés, l'homme peut régner et connaître enfin. (*E*, 659)

Camus thus situates literary tropes of ascension and closure on the same conceptual spectrum as prisons, concentration camps, and empires. In this account, Sade's carceral imaginary, taken up and culminating in the explosive violence of surrealism's imagery, finds its historical and political correlatives in modern state terror.

No doubt there is something questionable in Camus's conflation of rhetoric and practice, of imagined and real violence. The sweep of his indictment, the enumeration of textual and political exercises of power, may initially strike the reader as an idealist blind spot in his thought. Yet it is the slippage between literary figuration and historical violence in this passage and throughout the essay that I find most compelling in Camus's understanding of art and terror. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the treatment of violence as a formal operation that takes place in literature and history is central to Baudelaire's poetics and politics. By situating metaphorical and literal violence on the same conceptual continuum, Camus, like Baudelaire and the other authors examined thus far, suggests that figuration possesses a performative force that shapes and inflects historical reality. Violence and representation are fully imbricated, and this imbrication operates in overlapping areas of thought and life.

Baudelaire's poems map analogous figural operations in poetry and other fields of social and political power; his practice of counterviolence exploits the complicity between poetry's allegorical violence and existing cultural regimes

of representation. The poet's formal understanding of violence anticipates Camus's aesthetic genealogy of terror. This shared vision of the irrealizing violence of aesthetic form might explain why Camus's discussion of metaphysical rebellion traces the origins of literature's complicity with terror back to late romanticism. Camus reads the gradual eclipse of literature's referential function in the nineteenth century (the standard account of "art for art's sake" discussed in Chapter 2) in light of a deification of form that collaborates with the origins of modern terror. The autonomy, closure, and irrealization celebrated in literary works by Sade, Lautréamont, and the surrealists, find their material incarnation in the reifying brutality of the totalitarian state. For Camus, the logic of empire is akin to the romantic imagination in its assumption of the plasticity of reference itself: "L'Empire suppose une négation et une certitude : la certitude de l'infinie plasticité de l'homme et la négation de la nature humaine. . . . S'il n'y a pas de nature humaine, la plasticité de l'homme est, en effet, infinie. Le réalisme politique, à ce degré, n'est qu'un romantisme sans frein, un romantisme de l'efficacité" (*E*, 640).

Camus designates as "romantic" aesthetic and political performances of absolute mastery that negate the irreducible difference and givenness of the material world and its subjects. Such unbridled romanticism necessarily assumes the materiality of the world to be infinitely malleable. Romanticism and realpolitik converge in their assumption of referential plasticity, of the sovereign imagination or empire's power to shape reality in its image.

Against such murderous ideologies and their aesthetic correlatives, Camus argued for the resuscitation of some fragment of humanity that escaped historical determination and resisted the claims of ideological and aesthetic representation alike. If literature was to contest the plasticity or erasure of the individual by larger historical processes, it could only do so by communicating the living texture of human suffering, the body's fragility when confronted with the force of history. As we shall see, Camus's portrayal of the body as a vulnerable site on which competing allegorical claims are exercised belongs to an ongoing reflection on literature's referential debt to the bodies it represents.

Despite the remarkable affinities between their understanding of violence as a formal principle deployed in aesthetics and politics, ironically enough, in *L'Homme révolté*, Camus positions Baudelaire as yet another point of relay in the conceptual continuum of terror. The chapter on metaphysical rebellion presents Baudelaire's dandy in light of the romantic subject's dangerous self-deification in a secular world. The Baudelairean dandy creates "sa propre unité par des moyens esthétiques" (*E*, 462). This self-unification through form at-

tempts a personal askesis that is driven by the same impulse as the self-deifying collective ascensions of modern totalitarianisms. This view of dandyism could not be further from Foucault's, which, as we saw in the preceding chapter, cautiously envisions corporeal self-fashioning as a form of resistance to the subjectivizing forces of the state and market. Camus envisions dandyism as "une forme dégradée de l'ascèse" (*E*, 461), as the sterile, nihilistic manifestation of individual rebellion. Yet, having situated Baudelaire in terms of terror and its metaphors of closure, Camus concludes his portrait of the poet with an enigmatic swerve: "Son vrai drame, qui l'a fait le plus grand poète de son temps, était ailleurs. Baudelaire ne peut être évoqué ici que dans la mesure où il a été le théoricien le plus profond du dandysme et donne des formules définitives à une des conclusions de la révolte romantique" (*E*, 463).

To what extent did Camus reevaluate Baudelaire's oeuvre after writing *L'Homme révolté*? Did he look for the *ailleurs* that he saw as the forum for the poet's true drama? Could we read Camus's later explorations of the dark side of commitment as a return to Baudelaire, in an attempt to find a way out of the apparent impasses of aesthetic rebellion? As early as 1940, Roger Quillot hazarded a reference to Baudelaire when discussing the title of Camus's *L'Étranger* (which is also the title of the opening prose poem of Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris*), but Camus responded that the allusion was no doubt unconscious.⁸ Four years after the publication of *L'Homme révolté*, however, Camus's enigmatic *La Chute* came out. Its distinctly Baudelairean resonances suggest that Camus may have returned to the poet in the course of the novel's writing. The famous rupture with Sartre over *L'Homme révolté* might have prompted a rereading of Baudelaire, who, it should be remembered, was also harshly condemned by Sartre in 1947, and on very similar grounds. Throughout the prosecutorial exchange that followed the hostile review of *L'Homme révolté* in *Les Temps modernes* in 1952 by Sartre's young colleague Francis Jeanson, Sartre and Jeanson cast the former *résistant* as a Baudelairean dandy, a failed rebel whose sullen withdrawal from praxis had led to a self-righteous, aestheticist, and ultimately terroristic stance.⁹ In a ferocious caricature, the writer of *Les Mains sales* attacked Camus's tentative pokes into the ambiguous waters of historical action: "Tout comme la fillette qui tâte l'eau de l'orteil en demandant : « Est-elle chaude ? » vous regardez l'Histoire avec défiance, vous y plongez un doigt que vous retirez très vite et vous demandez : « A-t-elle un sens ? »."¹⁰ For Sartre, Camus's denunciation of revolutionary violence in *L'Homme révolté* was blind to the writer's inextricable situatedness in history. Instead of participating in constructive political projects, Camus had relegated himself to a purely

negative, condemnatory stance (“vous vous êtes condamné à condamner, Sisyphe” (*TM*, 345). Even Camus the *résistant* was denounced as a purely reactive rebel rather than a genuine revolutionary, one who had bravely defended the status quo before the madness of Hitlerism but had abdicated before the exigencies of postwar reconstruction. The only option for such exalted moral intransigence was, according to Sartre, exile from history itself: “je ne vois qu’une solution pour vous : les îles Galapagos” (*TM*, 343).

In 1947, Sartre had dismissed Baudelaire’s rebellion (against his family, the Second Empire, and his historical epoch) in similar terms. For the philosopher of praxis, the nineteenth-century poet’s *révolte* was far too invested in existing structures of authority to open up genuine revolutionary insight. Baudelaire’s withdrawal into the reified language of poetry and into strategies of “loser wins” or *qui perd gagne* through figures such as the dandy and the *héautontimorouménos*, exemplified the nineteenth century’s retreat into the sterile narcissicism of “art for art’s sake.” In the scathing exchange over *L’Homme révolté*, Camus is assigned to the class of *littérateurs* who, like Baudelaire, abdicate from the demands of history, serving instead the terroristic abstraction of literature: “La Terreur est une violence abstraite. Vous êtes devenu terroriste et violent quand l’histoire—que vous rejetiez—vous a rejeté à son tour : c’est que vous n’étiez qu’une abstraction de révolté. . . . Votre morale s’est d’abord changé en moralisme, aujourd’hui elle n’est plus que littérature, demain elle sera peut-être immoralité.”¹¹

Sartre’s prophecy that *L’Homme révolté* was but literature on the verge of immorality, was fulfilled, not “demain” but a few years later, with the publication of *La Chute*. Ironically enough, Camus’s novel earned high praise in Sartre’s posthumous tribute: “On vivait avec ou contre sa pensée, telle que nous la révélait ses livres—*La Chute*, surtout, le plus beau peut-être et le moins compris—mais toujours à travers elle” (*Sit.*, 4: 127). Did Sartre himself understand the extent to which its protagonist incarnates the caricature of Camus in *Les Temps modernes*?¹² A *juge-pénitent* who is “condemned to condemn” and longs for the edenic innocence of islands (Cipango instead of Galapagos this time), Jean-Baptiste Clamence exemplifies the moral terrorism that Sartre had imputed to Camus. Even the caricature of Camus’s tentative pokes into history’s chilly waters is echoed in Clamence’s inability to dive into the Seine and save a drowning woman. Sartre’s praise of the novel is all the more ironic when we consider that *La Chute* stages the very argument he had dismissed in 1952, for its protagonist’s monologue is a brilliant illustration of the logic of totality and terror described in *L’Homme révolté*. Did Sartre discern the Baude-

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lairean resonance of Camus's novel—its crepuscular lyricism, the *dolorisme* of its lucidity, its journey into *la conscience dans le mal*?¹³

Sartre's portrait of Camus as a dandy in revolt may thus have prompted a return to Baudelaire. Yet we could also speculate that the genealogy of terror in *L'Homme révolté*, as Camus's most systematic attempt to grapple with art's relations to politics and ethics, led him to reassess Baudelaire and the tradition of "art for art's sake" he represented and to consider the poet's exploration into art, history, and the problem of evil. *La Chute* deepens the meditation undertaken in *L'Homme révolté* on the complicity between literature and other regimes of power. Clamence's confession illustrates Baudelaire's strategy of irony as counterviolence, for it is at once a symptom and a critique of terror.¹⁴ Haunted by the knowledge that contestation is fraught with ambiguity, that resistance is always on the verge of renewing the violence that is denounced, Camus's text explores the possibilities of commitment in a medium complicit with violence.

La Chute is an eminently Baudelairean text in its atmosphere, themes, tropes, and characters. Yet it is also an investigation of art's responsibility at a particular historical juncture—in the aftermath of war, occupation, collaboration, and genocide, and in the midst of complex, if not even paralyzing, choices for the intellectual: the fate of the Left in France and abroad, its reckoning with state-sanctioned or insurgent terror in Stalin's Gulag archipelago and Algeria respectively. Camus's novel reflects upon the intellectual's complicity with the violence of history and probes for alternatives to the dominant Sartrean model of commitment in terms that resonate with the Baudelairean engagements this book has traced thus far. In the following pages, then, Baudelaire will serve as a *phare ironique* as we navigate the ironies of *La Chute*. His poetry will illuminate Camus's journey into *la conscience dans le mal* and the paths left open for commitment in postwar France.

Narrative Terror, Irony, and Ideology in La Chute

Ces transformations progressives caractérisent le monde de la terreur rationnelle où vit, à des degrés différents, l'Europe. Le dialogue, relation des personnes, a été remplacé par la propagande ou la polémique, qui sont deux sortes de monologue. L'abstraction, propre au monde des forces et du calcul, a remplacé les vrais passions qui sont du domaine de la chair et de l'irrationnel. Camus, *L'Homme révolté*

Par exemple, vous avez dû le remarquer, notre vieille Europe philosophe enfin de la bonne façon. Nous ne disons plus, comme aux temps naïfs : « Je pense ainsi. Quelles sont vos objections ? » Nous sommes devenus lucides. Nous avons remplacé le dialogue par le communiqué. « Telle est la vérité, disons-nous. Vous pouvez toujours la discuter, ça ne nous intéresse pas. Mais dans quelques années, il y aura la police, qui vous montrera que j'ai raison ».

Camus, *La Chute*

For Camus, one of the greatest challenges facing postwar Europe was the restitution of a dialogical structure of communication. The age of ideologies, culminating in the atrocities of twentieth-century's totalitarianisms, had coerced entire populations to actively or passively endorse murder through various forms of propaganda masquerading as fact or logic. Monologue, abstraction, propaganda, communiqué: this was the ideological artillery of terror. These weapons had delivered individuals to the violence of what Georges Perec called "l'Histoire avec sa grande hache," not only as victims but also as executioners and accomplices. The abstract monologues of ideology banished alternative sources of value such as the human body and nature, both of which precede, exceed, and posit a limit to, the violence of history itself. *La Chute* is a narrative inquiry into the ideological strategies of terror. It performs the violence of ideology itself, but also gestures toward the limits posed by the reality of human suffering. This reading will begin by mapping the ideological valences of the novel's structure before turning to its ethical reflection on the human body ("le domaine de la chair et de l'irrationnel") as the site upon which the violence of history is enacted, and in whose name this violence must be resisted.

L'Homme révolté defined terror as "une subjectivité interminable qui s'impose aux autres comme objectivité." If this was, as Camus asserted, "la définition philosophique de la terreur" (*E*, 646), the seamless first-person monologue of *La Chute* provides its narrative enactment. Jean-Baptiste Clamence, who describes himself as a "juge pénitent," has exiled himself to Amsterdam and converts those he encounters to his reign of "lucid culpability." A Lermontovian hero of our times, his duplicitous confession bears witness to the failure of bourgeois humanism in the face of the great ethico-political challenges of the century: colonial oppression, class warfare, totalitarianism, and genocide. Once a successful and athletic Parisian lawyer and lover, a specialist in noble causes, his personal fall into self-division and bad faith marks a collective fall into the ambiguous violence of historical modernity.

Clamence is a failed rebel, a degraded Baudelairean poet who has tumbled

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from edenic plenitude into the modern heart of darkness. Like the poet of “Perte d’auréole” who haunts the taverns of Paris after losing his auratic halo to “la fange du macadam,” Clamence plays prophet in a seedy bar called “Mexico City” and complacently assumes Baudelaire’s descent into ironic lucidity, described in the poem “L’Irrémédiable”:

Tête-à-tête sombre et limpide
Qu’un coeur devenu son miroir !
.
Un phare ironique, infernal,
Flambeau des grâces sataniques,
Soulagement et gloire uniques,
— La conscience dans le Mal ! (OC, 1: 80)

La Chute exemplifies the fall into Baudelairean irony examined in the first chapter of this book. Its protagonist once basked in moral righteousness and social entitlement of the one who laughs in “De l’essence du rire” (Baudelaire’s “Moi je ne tombe pas”), and yet is tripped up and falls into duplicity, abjection, and bad faith.¹⁵ A kindred spirit of the dandy and *héautontimorouménos*, he is at once knife and wound, subject and object, of his *mal du siècle*. As we shall see, however, Clamence’s fall does not lead to the lucid irony of rebellion, which for both Baudelaire and Camus required maintaining the reversals of authority proper to an ironic consciousness. Instead, his confession puts irony in service of terror.

While the origins of Clamence’s ontological fall remain mysterious, it consistently occurs in *La Chute*, as in Baudelaire, under the sign of laughter. The first incident signaling Clamence’s fall is trivial enough. At the height of his professional, social, and sexual prowess, he is caught in a traffic jam caused by a motorcyclist. He asks the man to remove his vehicle, thus provoking his ire. In the confusion that ensues, not only is Clamence accused of mistreating the biker, but he is also slapped by the man in question and retreats “sous les regards ironiques de la foule.” For the first time he becomes the *object* of laughter and experiences the subjection of another’s derisive gaze. Thereafter, laughter is indissociably linked to his fall before another’s eyes: “Oui, ils étaient là, comme avant, mais ils riaient. . . . J’eus même l’impression, à cette époque, qu’on me faisait des crocs-en-jambe. Deux ou trois fois, en effet, je butai, sans raison, en entrant dans des endroits publiques. Une fois même, je m’étais.” Clamence becomes subject and the object of a typical Baudelairean *dédoublement*. The fall into lucidity is accompanied, as in Baudelaire, by the

explosion of laughter: "Du jour où je fus alerté, la lucidité me vint, je reçus toutes les blessures en même temps et je perdis mes forces d'un seul coup. L'univers entier se mit alors à rire autour de moi."¹⁶ Yet unlike Baudelaire's ironic philosopher, who maintains these reversals of authority by ironizing his own sense of superiority, Clamence reverses his fall into a new ascension, which, we belatedly realize, governs the course of his confession.

For Camus as for Baudelaire, irony and rebellion are lucid oppositions that nevertheless harbor within them the seeds of mystified authoritarianism. As *L'Homme révolté* argued, rebellion is always threatened by a compensatory self-deification, be it through aesthetic means (as in the dandy) or the more dangerous collective ascensions of the state. In Baudelaire, this authoritarianism is represented by the *Homme dieu* of "Le Poème du hashisch," who in his drug-induced fantasy, imagines that all things are created by and for him.¹⁷ Jean-Baptiste Clamence betrays the origins of rebellion, which for Camus lie in the unresolvable tension between self and world, as well as self and other. Ignoring the dynamic reversals that form the ethical core of ironic lucidity, Clamence freezes his fall and establishes an authoritarian fiction of universal culpability. His sly confession moves from a "Je" who has fallen to the "nous" of a community that is equally fallen but unaware of it. The silent interlocutor-reader is turned into Baudelaire's "Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère": "Le réquisitoire est achevé. Mais du même coup, le portrait que je tends à mes contemporains devient un miroir. . . . Je suis comme eux, bien sûr, nous sommes dans le même bouillon. J'ai cependant une supériorité, celle de le savoir, qui me donne le droit de parler."¹⁸

Clamence emerges as an authoritarian ironist, the thwarted idealist heir to such Baudelairean figures as the despotic prince of "Une Mort héroïque," the ironic consciousness of "L'Héautontimorouménos," and the poet-philosopher of "Assommons les pauvres !" He displays both the triumph of one who has seized epistemological power in a world divested of given values and the anguish of a psyche locked into the sadomasochistic repetition of its fall into lucidity. As a figure for the artist, Clamence radicalizes the despotism of Baudelaire's sovereign imagination. A modern-day allegorist, Clamence is not content with hollowing out the city around him, as the flâneur-poet of "Le Cygne" does when he declares that "tout pour moi devient allégorie" (*OC*, 1: 86). Nor do his allegories bear witness to the victims of history by resurrecting those who have fallen out of modernity's frame of reference ("Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île, / Aux captifs, aux vaincus ! . . . à bien d'autres encor !" (*OC*, 1: 87). Instead, Clamence seeks out blank spaces for a purely

specular exercise of imaginative sovereignty. As he contemplates the livid horizon of the Zuyderzee, drenched in fog and spleen, Camus's flâneur celebrates a landscape from which all traces of the human have been expunged:

Voilà, n'est-ce pas, le plus beau des paysages négatifs ! Voyez, à notre gauche, ce tas de cendres qu'on appelle ici une dune, la digue grise à notre droite, la grève livide à nos pieds et, devant nous, la mer couleur de lessive faible, le vaste ciel où se reflètent les eaux blêmes. Un enfer mou, vraiment ! Rien que des horizontales, aucun éclat, l'espace est incolore, la vie morte. N'est-ce pas l'effacement universel, le néant sensible aux yeux ? Pas d'hommes, surtout, pas d'hommes ! Vous et moi, seulement, devant la planète enfin déserte. (*T*, 1512)

The most beautiful negative landscape, for Clamence, is one that empties real places, people, and events of content and materiality. This transformation of a heterogeneous reality into closed allegories of identity surfaces numerous times in *La Chute*, and in terms so Baudelairean that they are virtually quotations. Baudelaire's poet-prostitute and his narcissistic relationship to the crowd in "Les Foules" ("Pour lui seul, tout est vacant" [*OC*, 1: 291]) finds its echo in Clamence's desire that "sur toute la terre, tous les êtres, ou le plus grand nombre possible, fussent tournés vers moi, éternellement vacants, privés de vie indépendante, prêts à répondre à mon appel à n'importe quel moment, voués enfin à la stérilité jusqu'au jour où je daignerais les favoriser de ma lumière" (*T*, 1510). In "Les Fenêtres," Baudelaire's narrator defends the priority of his fiction over the reality of another being: "Peut-être me direz-vous : « Es-tu sûr que cette légende soit la vraie ? » Qu'importe ce que peut être *la réalité placée hors de moi*, si elle m'a aidé à vivre, à sentir qui je suis et ce que je suis ?" (*OC*, 1: 339; emphasis added). This radical subjectivism is echoed in Clamence's defense of lies as a route to truth: "Et mes histoires, vraies ou fausses, ne tendent-elles pas toutes à la même fin, n'ont-elles pas le même sens ? Alors, *qu'importe qu'elles soient vraies ou fausses, si, dans les deux cas, elles sont significatives de ce que j'ai été et de ce que je suis ?*" (*T*, 1537; emphasis added). Baudelaire's *légende* and Clamence's confessions are instances in which a narrator proudly and anxiously asserts the legitimacy of his self-narration while gesturing to its referential instability. Yet Baudelaire's poet-narrators demystify their fictions and disclose the underlying violence of allegory itself, thus remaining faithful to irony's self-critical dynamism. Clamence, however, performs an act of allegorical closure when he freezes his fall into a theology of guilt. In this sense, he enacts the violence of ideology identified in *L'Homme révolté* (the transformation of a vital, heterogeneous world into a fixed allegory of culpability). His discourse is

both a symptom and a critique of the disincarnated logic of terror. It erases all traces of contestation so that his word, like that of his namesake “John the Baptist,” can resonate uncontested and inaugurate his reign of lucid culpability. Thus, while Clamence accuses modern politics and philosophy of eradicating dialogue in favor of the communiqué, his monologue itself functions as a communiqué. Clamence is a prophet of cynical reason and an exemplary narrator, whose methodical demonstration of individual and collective fallenness enacts the violence of ideology itself: “l’idéologie, qui substitue à la réalité vivante une succession logique de raisonnements” (*E*, 742).

Yet the narrative structure of *La Chute* sabotages the authority of Clamence’s ideology at several points and incites the reader to vigilance. The status of his confession as a tour de force in rhetorical manipulation is made explicit in many cautionary asides such as “Ne vous fiez pas trop, d’ailleurs, à mes attendrissements, ni à mes délires. Ils sont dirigés” (*T*, 1550). The reader-interlocutor is warned to treat this discourse not as mimetic but as rhetorical and performative. While Clamence coerces his silent interlocutor (and the reader) into mirroring his guilt, the possibility that the interlocutor will like the beggar of “Assommons les pauvres !” in turn contest his rhetorical subjection and laugh *at* Clamence is suggested at several points: “Ne riez pas ! Oui, vous êtes un client difficile, je l’ai vu du premier coup. Mais vous y viendrez, c’est inévitable.”¹⁹

The Proximity of Violence and the Politics of Guilt

What is the historical significance of Clamence’s theology of guilt? And how does this theology resonate with the postwar climate of terror diagnosed in *L’Homme révolté*? Clamence’s doctrine of universal culpability is derived from interconnected personal, historical, and religious sources. In recreating a genealogy of Western guilt that indicts Christ himself, he does not merely reiterate a disenchanting theology of the Fall but exploits slippages between personal, spiritual, and historical fallenness that are charged with political significance. The sliding frames of references inscribe his individual reflections within a broader collective trajectory. Clamence’s failure to rescue a drowning woman becomes analogous to Christ’s culpable survival of the massacre of Judea’s children, which itself is implicated in Europe’s passive collusion with the atrocities of colonial violence and genocide.²⁰ Clamence functions simultaneously as a symptom, critic, and apologist for past and current manifestations of terror. His condemnation of himself and of his contemporaries res-

onates with multiple instances of historical culpability, particularly France's refusal to reckon with the ongoing reality of the concentration-camp universe (or *le fait concentrationnaire*), of torture, terrorism, and state-sponsored terror in Stalin's Russia and war-torn Algeria.

Clamence has embraced the knowledge that, just as Amsterdam is at once the center and the extreme point of the continent, similarly, the heart of modern historical experience, its new ground and norm, hovers at the extreme limit of the thinkable: "Mais vous comprenez alors que je puis dire que le *centre* des choses est ici, bien que nous nous trouvions à l'extrémité du continent" (*T*, 1483). His confession illuminates the proximity of violence in everyday life, drawing his interlocutor into complicity with what Hannah Arendt called the "banality of evil."²¹ As readers of his monologue, we are solicited to decipher the historical resonance of his imagery and to fill in the blanks of a confession that could be our own. When Clamence skips over the description of a concentration camp in Tripoli, then, it is only because we, his contemporaries, share his fallen condition of *spleen*: "Nous autres, enfants du demi-siècle, n'avons pas besoin de dessin pour s'imaginer ces sortes d'endroits. Il y a cent cinquante ans, on s'attendrissait sur les lacs et les forêts. Aujourd'hui nous avons le lyrisme cellulaire" (*T*, 1539).

The novel's oscillating frames of reference (Paris, Amsterdam, Jerusalem, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, North Africa) underscore the pervasion of this *lyrisme cellulaire*, or carceral imaginary, to disclose its dormant presence in the everyday practices of even a liberal democracy. Clamence deploys a thematics and rhetoric of hygiene to bring home the reality of terror.²² Just as Camus's essay on rebellion links seemingly disparate aesthetic and historical contexts through its metaphors of closure, similarly, the rhetoric of hygiene in *La Chute* links bourgeois values to genocide, social grooming to ethnic cleansing, to point out the violence underlying all social structures built on the premise of a unified totality:

N'avez-vous pas remarqué que notre société s'est organisée pour ce genre de liquidation ? Vous avez entendu parler, naturellement, de ces minuscules poissons des rivières brésiliennes qui s'attaquent par milliers au nageur imprudent, le nettoient, en quelques instants, à petites bouchées rapides, et n'en laissent qu'un squelette immaculé ? Eh bien, c'est ça leur organisation. « Voulez-vous d'une vie propre ? Comme tout le monde ? » Vous dites oui, naturellement. Comment dire non ? « D'accord. On va vous nettoyer. Voilà un métier, une famille, des loisirs organisés. » Et les petites dents s'attaquent à la chair, jusqu'aux os. Mais je suis injuste. Ce n'est pas leur organisation

qu'il faut dire. Elle est la notre après tout : c'est à qui nettoiera l'autre. (*T*, 1479)

Clarence denounces the repressed savagery of the liberal bourgeois state, its regulation of public and private spheres, its emphasis on organization, homogeneity and the family. The individual's willingness to abdicate agency sustains this standardization ("Vous dites oui, naturellement"), an abdication that for Clarence—as for Baudelaire's poet-narrators—mutates into a murderous conformism that sanctions state terror.²³

To better probe this modern heart of darkness, Clarence chooses to make his home on the site of one of history's greatest crimes: "Moi, j'habite le quartier juif, ou ce qui s'appelait ainsi jusqu'au moment où nos frères hitlériens y ont fait de la place. Quel lessivage ! Soixante-quinze mille juifs déportés ou assassinés, c'est le nettoyage par le vide. J'admire cette application, cette méthodique patience. Quand on a pas de caractère, il faut bien se donner une méthode" (*T*, 1481). The reference to this cleansing will be echoed later in an elliptical allusion to the Final Solution as a "grande entreprise de blanchissage" (*T*, 1532). Clarence points out the infection of a logic that draws the French, and the European community, into alliance with "nos frères hitlériens," their organization being but a distorted mirror image of our own: "Elle est la notre après tout : c'est à qui nettoiera l'autre."

Baudelaire's meditation on the violence of modernity (explored in the murderous ties of commerce in "La Corde" and the mutation of fraternity into fratricide in "Le Gâteau," as well as in other poems addressing the legacy of revolutionary terror) is echoed in Camus's postwar vision of Europe's ongoing complicity with the logic of extermination. By charting the continuities between the hygienic social rites of a bourgeois liberal society, the terror of the police state, and the eliminationism of the concentration camp, Clarence turns his interlocutor, the reader, the bourgeois, and all of modern Europe into accomplices. The narrative thus refuses to polarize "us" against "them," "victims" against "executioners," thereby also undoing the opposition between center and extreme. Europe has fallen into the violence of modernity, and its inhabitants are bound together by *la conscience dans le mal*.

One of the interpretive difficulties posed by *La Chute* is the irony of its narrative mode. Clarence is a demystifier whose insights ring true and false at once. He offers a damning critique of terror, illuminating its presence in all areas of thought and life, and yet his own confession exemplifies its logic. He illustrates the oscillation between victim, executioner, and witness characteris-

tic of Baudelairean irony. This oscillation, however confusing, is essential to the novel's critical power. As we have seen in our discussion of other authors, irony retains its critical edge by performing the very state it condemns and opening a range of positions for the reader as victim, executioner, and accomplice of the violence that is represented. The displacement of referential frames and of subject positions in Clamence's confession performs this collapse into general culpability in a manner reminiscent of Baudelaire's address to his reader as a complicitous "hypocrite lecteur." Yet this performance of complicity, while central to the political (self-)interrogation in Camus's novel, is *itself* ironized and shown to be complicit with terror.

Clamence's theology of guilt has concrete historical precedents in the totalitarian police state. His rhetoric of culpability replicates what Camus understood to be one of the most terrifying features of modern terror. The obliteration of innocence both lamented by Clamence and yet reinstated in his theory of absolute culpability was, according to Camus, a central aim of Nazi Germany, and more generally, of totalitarian ideology:

La propagande, la torture, sont des moyens directs de désintégration ; plus encore la décheance systématique, l'amalgame avec le criminel cynique, la complicité forcée. Celui qui tue ou torture ne connaît qu'une ombre à sa victoire : il ne peut pas se sentir innocent. Il faut donc *créer la culpabilité chez la victime* elle-même pour que, dans un monde sans direction, la culpabilité générale ne légitime plus que l'exercice de la force, ne consacre plus que le succès. Quand l'idée de l'innocence disparaît chez l'innocent lui-même, la valeur de puissance règne dans un monde désespéré. C'est pourquoi une ignoble et cruelle pénitence règne sur ce monde où seules les pierres sont innocentes. *Les condamnés sont obligés de se pendre les uns les autres.* (*E*, 589; emphasis added)

The totalitarian state creates its subjects in its own image and legitimates terror through the imposition of universal guilt. This obliteration of innocence collapses all distinction between executioner and victim and creates the seamless fiction of a community of accomplices. Camus cites the example of a Greek mother asked by a sadistic Nazi officer to choose which of her sons will be shot, an anecdote that, significantly enough, is repeated by Clamence in *La Chute* as proof of the methodical inhumanity exercised in recent history and of the impossibility of claiming to be innocent of its atrocities.²⁴ Yet even as Clamence denounces such forms of torture, his confession rhetorically reproduces their underlying ideology of complicity and subjection. The invocation of collective guilt is the first step in Clamence's discursive replication of a state

of terror in which force and manipulation masquerade as logical consistency to create a community of accomplices bound by an identical fallen condition. Clamence participates in the state he denounces, as both symptom and critic, passive collaborator and apologist for the violence of modernity. His peculiar position as at once victim, executioner, *and* witness exemplifies Camus's vision of the intellectual's abdication of lucidity vis-à-vis the faits accomplis of history. The surrender of oppositional thought, considered irrelevant to the course of history, dooms the intellectual to participate in forms of oppression seen as structurally inevitable and to become complicit in the violent workings of power.²⁵

"Les yeux du corps": Embodied Injustice in La Chute

Les vrais artistes. . . sont les témoins de la chair, non de la loi.

Camus, "Le Témoin de la liberté" (1948)

Ce n'est pas la logique que je réfute, mais l'idéologie qui substitue à la réalité vivante une succession logique de raisonnements.

Camus, "Entretien sur la révolte" (February 15, 1952)

For Camus, the ethical imperative of postwar writing was to commemorate the tangible fact of individual suffering, an irreducible reality threatened, overlooked, or betrayed in an age of murderous abstraction. Camus thus shares with his Baudelairean predecessors a preoccupation with the lived experience of the body, its fragility and excess vis-à-vis the forces of history. Against the murderous ideologies that reify the body for a "higher" purpose, and their aesthetic correlatives, Camus called for the resuscitation of the concept of a human nature that exceeds or resists the claims of history, ideology, and representation. "Nous vivons dans la terreur parce que la persuasion n'est plus possible, parce que l'homme a été livré tout entier à l'histoire et qu'il ne peut plus se tourner vers cette part de lui-même, aussi vraie que la part historique, et qu'il retrouve devant la beauté du monde et des visages ; parce que nous vivons dans le monde de l'abstraction, celui des bureaux et des machines, des idées absolues et du messianisme sans nuances," his 1946 article "Le Siècle de la peur" declares (*E*, 332). From the postwar articles collected under the heading of *La Chair* to the passages in *Le Premier Homme* describing his father's nausea upon witnessing the horror of capital punishment, Camus's thought consistently returns to the materiality of the body, the irreducibility of its contact

with others and with nature. The writer was to bear witness to this fragile “nature humaine” that is always in excess of historicity and yet forever threatened by it.

In 1944, prior to his disillusionment with the *épuration*, Camus asserted that the crime for which the collaborator Pierre Pucheu had been executed was his lack of *imagination*, his inability to see beyond the abstraction of his bureaucratic functions and to understand the corporeal reality of the laws passed under the Vichy régime: “Pour ce genre d’hommes, c’est toujours la même abstraction qui continue et je suppose que le plus grand de leurs crimes à nos yeux est de n’avoir jamais approché un corps . . . avec les yeux du corps et la notion que j’appellerai physique de la justice” (*E*, 1469). This embodied understanding of justice, and the almost somatic apprehension of the other it presumes, was all the more urgent in a time when philosophers and politicians collaborated in a historical logic that justified the unjustifiable fact of human suffering.

The previous chapters turned to representations of the body in Baudelaire, Balzac, Mallarmé, Rachilde, and Despentès that probe its vulnerability before aesthetic and historical violence. Baudelaire’s poetry illuminates how a body marked by class, economic value, gender, and race functions as a symbolic site upon which a series of violent cultural logics are performed to define the experience of modernity. His *mise-en-scène* of overlapping forms of allegorical violence offers a genealogy of how bodies come to signify (in terms of meaning and value) in historical modernity and aesthetic modernism. By putting bodies on display, Baudelaire also put poetry on trial, and explored the complicity between aesthetic and real life discourses that “produce” the body as savage nature and as meaningful sign. Rachilde and Despentès’s interventions in the Baudelairean legacy continue this demystification of the body’s aesthetic and cultural construction. Their scenes of violence rehearse and reverse the gender politics of the decadent imagination and beyond. Not only do they challenge the opposition between the body’s materiality and its semiotic inscriptions. Their enactment of matter’s revenge on form takes Baudelaire’s counterviolence one step further and offers glimpses into a subject’s embodied experience of violence. In these Baudelairean approaches, irony recovers the violence of a body’s inscription into representation.

Camus’s preoccupation with the body’s precariousness, its vulnerability before the aesthetic and ideological imagination, is explicitly addressed in *L’Homme révolté*. The suffering of those who are subjected to historical processes—and objectified in literature—is central to the essay’s reflection on the violence of representation.²⁶ Camus believed that the writer’s allegiance

was to those who endured history, and not to those who made it: “Par définition, il [l’écrivain] ne peut se mettre aujourd’hui au service de ceux qui font l’histoire : Il est au service de ceux qui la subissent” (*E*, 1072). Yet if the author was to bear witness to those silenced and disempowered by history, it would not be by “speaking for” them but rather by rehearsing the very structures of oppression that erase them out of history’s frames.²⁷ We saw how this irony operates at the level of the narrative structure in *La Chute*, where Clamence incarnates the abstract terror and historicism decried in *L’Homme révolté*. My concluding reflections will suggest that the self-demystifying structure of *La Chute* also performs a revenge of matter on form. The disincarnated force of Clamence’s confession breaks down at key points to reveal an embodied experience of violence that challenges the text’s representational authority. Despite the narrator’s discursive mastery, the text’s irony allows the reader to recover an apprehension of the other with the “les yeux du corps, et la notion . . . physique de la justice.”

The presence of the other, of the body, and of its pain resurface in uncanny fragments throughout *La Chute*. The weight of human suffering erased by recent history, an erasure duplicated by the text’s own abstraction, glimmers in allusions to an unrepresented, omnipresent pain. This pain is recorded by Clamence’s body but disavowed by his confession. The woman whom Clamence failed to rescue, and whose cries mutate into his internalized self-derision, is a central figure for this suffering. The fusion of her cries with his laughter yields a *rire-cri* that repeatedly threatens to collapse the narrative’s frame of reference.

Clamence ostentatiously points out that the episode on the Pont des Arts is the heart of his confession, a shameful truth that stands naked amidst all the artificial devices of his self-narration. It is “cette aventure que j’ai trouvé au centre de ma mémoire et dont je ne puis différer plus longtemps le récit, malgré mes digressions et les efforts d’une invention à laquelle, j’espère, vous rendez justice” (*T*, 1510). After an evening of lovemaking, Clamence’s body is in perfect concord with his surroundings, as it has always been prior to this incident. He passes by the dark silhouette of a woman who blends in with the night as she stands on a bridge. Yet a startling detail is recalled by Clamence’s sensual eye: “Entre les cheveux sombres et le col du manteau, on voyait seulement une nuque, fraîche et mouillée, à laquelle je fus sensible” (*T*, 1511).

The crash of the body as it presumably hits the water vertiginously possesses Clamence: “Je tremblais, je crois, de froid et de saisissement” (*T*, 1511). His helpless trembling—“je sentais une faiblesse irresistible envahir mon corps”—translates into a discursive faltering, which interrupts the course of

his narrative at several points. The cries of the woman as she is evidently carried away by the river will continue to ring in his ears, mutating into an internalized laughter that marks the belated recognition of his connection to a stranger's unknown fate. Indeed, years later, when Clamence once again finds himself poised over a body of water, celebrating his regained mental and physical integrity, he sees a black piece of flotsam, a *point noir* that instantly resurrects the scene of the drowning. The piece of debris left behind by a ship resuscitates the memory of a wet nape and the body Clamence has attempted to leave behind. This corporeal shard and its reminder of another's suffering becomes an embodied point of resistance to Clamence's self-referential discourse. The convergence of these separate moments (of trembling or passivity and recovery) also signals the convergence of Clamence's self-ironic laughter and the cry of the victim. The suffering body that cries out for a response emerges as a rupture or *rire-cri* escaping the narrative economy of the confession while functioning as its repressed structural principle.

Yet despite the central place accorded to the scene of the drowning, Camus's text refuses to deliver one foundational "trauma" around which the confession is symptomatically organized. Instead, the "fall" is decentered and lends itself to multiple allegorical readings. In a similar passage at the close of the text, as he lies bedridden and feverish, Clamence once again evokes the residual effects of a moral fall that his body has recorded: "Ce n'est rien, un peu de fièvre que je soigne au genièvre. J'ai l'habitude de ces accès. Du paludisme, je crois, que j'ai contracté du temps que j'étais pape" (*T*, 1537). He later discloses that his crime as "pope" in a North African concentration camp was to drink the water of a dying comrade.²⁸

In Camus's fiction, as for the other authors examined thus far, consciousness often discloses its secrets through the body's somatic expressions.²⁹ In Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*, Jacques's blushes of shame express his intuitive sense of physical expropriation vis-à-vis Raoule's economic and sexual mastery. *Baise-moi* describes its protagonists' murders as corporeal automatisms that replicate the structural violence of their environment. In Camus's novel, Clamence's body also records events that are repressed in his narration. When he refuses to cross a bridge at the close of the first chapter, foreshadowing the disclosure of the drowning, he refers to the residual aches symptomatic of his past inability to dive into the Seine: "Supposez, après tout, que quelqu'un se jette à l'eau ? De deux choses l'une, ou vous l'y suivez pour le repêcher et, dans la saison froide, vous risquez le pire ! Ou vous l'y abandonnez et *les plongeurs rentrés laissent parfois d'étranges courbatures*" (*T*, 1483; emphasis added).

Clarence's encounter with and subsequent internalization of another's suffering manifests itself physically as residual fevers or aches, which partially record the full violence of the event. His body becomes the repository for a remembrance that his consciousness seeks to discard through his rationalization of collective guilt. The unassimilated experience that the mind seeks to obliterate, but that the body stubbornly resuscitates, inscribes a point of resistance to the narrative's totalizing abstraction. Clarence's shame at his inaction is reminiscent of Jacques Silvert's shame at his passivity in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*. In both cases, the body registers an awareness of vulnerability to the violence of the world, only for Clarence, it is the vulnerability of another that causes him shame. His confession is an attempt to exorcise this shame by turning it into a collective ethos of culpability, and yet is exposed by the narrative as an untenable form of bad faith.

As we see in the permutation of both an "original event" (the woman's fall from the bridge, the dying comrade whose water is drunk) and its symptomatic return (the laughter and cries), the specificity of the event is never confirmed. Indeed, the anonymous woman's cries rising from the Seine find their echo in Rachel's inconsolable wails, Christ's seditious outcry (censored by Luke) over the massacre of the innocents, and the protestation of the little Frenchman at Buchenwald, whose claim to innocence is met with the derisive laughter of his fellow inmates.³⁰ The fall unfolds over a series of contextual displacements that implicate a private scene of suffering (Clarence's somatic remembrance of the drowned woman's cries) within a broad frame of reference that is haunted by terror.

Clarence's allusions to the various forms of harm inflicted upon the body throughout history obsessively return to the human body's plasticity before another's violence. The medieval *cellule du malconfort*, a cell whose dimensions were just small enough to impede either sitting or standing, which, like Kafka's harrow, forced prisoners into a corporeal apprehension of guilt, finds its recent incarnations in identical cells in Nazi death camps, but also conjures up Stalin's Gulag archipelago and French torture in Algeria.³¹ As Clarence points out, inmates of the medieval cells were forgotten for life, a fate that resonates not only with his own belated encounters with past forgettings but also with postwar France's multiple forms of amnesia, bad faith, and silence. As a *bourreau-philosophe* of sorts, Clarence's specious reasoning is a form of "historicism" that condones a state of affairs simply because it exists. If a human being is tortured and confined, then surely that person is guilty: "Quoi ? On pouvait vivre dans ces cellules et être innocent ? Improbable, hautement

improbable ! Ou sinon, mon raisonnement se casserait le nez” (*T*, 1531). Clamence collaborates with historical terror in rationalizing injustice through “mon raisonnement” and refusing the call of imagination or “les yeux du corps.”

Clamence colludes with history’s erasure of the body and yet is compelled to resuscitate its suffering through temporal slides and intertwined metaphors. *La Chute*’s metaphor of hygiene resonates with a number of historical contexts, invoking the *épuration* and its sacrificial cleansing of France’s body politic, but also the Nazi genocide, Stalin’s labor camps, civilian France’s attempts to turn away from or wash its hands of its governments’ repressive measures in Algeria, and also, for Camus, the dissenting intellectuals’ sacrifice of French Algerians in expiation of the “sins” of colonialism.³² The *rive-cris* is a figure for the real cost in human suffering exacted by these political measures. The horror of collective, state-sanctioned violence, as well as insurgent terror, and the intellectual’s complicity in their legitimation, finds a paradoxical testimony in Clamence, whose confession is haunted by the practices of terror even as he replicates their eliminationist logic.

The kaleidoscopic treatment of the body in *La Chute* embeds points of resistance into the self-reflexive terrorism of Clamence’s confession. These narrative blind spots disclose a corporeal condition of suffering irreducible to narrative and ideological appropriation. Clamence’s faltering allusions to the body’s untheorizable suffering illuminate his contradictory position as simultaneously critic, apologist, and symptom of history’s ongoing violence. His confession is thus also burdened with a troubling affective charge that lingers within the reader as it foils the narrative’s closure. As Camus put it in his enigmatic preface to the novel, “Une seule vérité en tout cas, dans ce jeu de glaces étudié : la douleur, et ce qu’elle promet” (*T*, 2015). The promise of pain is intimately tied to imagination’s capacity to “see” history through the eyes of the body. Yet it also emerges out of the hall of mirrors that constitutes a genuinely self-reflexive project of critique.

Camus’s attempt to yoke a self-reflexive analysis of violence to an affective and even somatic apprehension of pain mediates between the interventionist claims of *engagement* and the testimonial force of literature. Our historical experience continues to lend credence to Clamence’s pessimistic pronouncement, “Chère planète ! Tout y est clair maintenant. Nous nous connaissons, nous savons ce dont nous sommes capables” (*T*, 1499). The concept of commitment requires a measure of faith in the political as a field for the exercise of agency, critique, and transformation. At certain historical junctures, we wit-

ness an erosion of belief in the individual's capacity to intervene in the course of history or to justly apprehend the suffering of others, as Clamence's feverish confession, made from the ruins of Amsterdam's Jewish ghetto, attests. Yet Clamence's *dolorisme*, his melancholy abdications before the many faces of terror, retain their relevance as a cautionary parable about the fate of critique. As we face emergent forms of terror and their visible and invisible costs—in different histories and geopolitical sites—Camus's negotiations between a self-reflexive, ironic inquiry into systemic violence and his passionate commitment to the absolute value of human life help to better define the challenges of theory before the ongoing fact of suffering.

The escalating violence of our century calls for discourses of commitment that forge connections between distinct eruptions of violence and their underlying structural causes, discourses that open up spaces for the recognition of our vulnerability and power in relation to histories and bodies other than our own. The project of critique is inseparable from imagination and the ability to look at history with the "eyes of the body" so that an "embodied notion of justice" can emerge. A self-reflexive inquiry into historical violence, Camus suggests, needs to retain the capacity to imagine another's pain.

Throughout his life, Sartre came to different conclusions about the necessity and legitimacy of violence. Although he believed—with Camus—that the intellectual's responsibility was to denounce all forms of terror, nevertheless, as a "compagnon de route" of communism and a committed supporter of the wars of decolonization, he came to sanction its inevitability, and even to celebrate its emancipatory, purging, or humanizing effects.³³ Sartre saw violence as an inextricable component of political life. In the aftermath of France's liberation, he declared that the writer's responsibility was not to speak from a fictitious vantage point of peace but to provide a theory of violence that would provide the grounds for a praxis of counterviolence: "Il faut savoir au nom de quoi on condamne la violence. Il faut d'abord savoir que nous vivons dans un univers de violence, que la violence n'a pas été inventé par les gens qui s'en servent, que tout est violence. Mais, dans ces conditions, il faut d'abord que l'écrivain essaie de faire, pour lui-même, une théorie de la violence, qu'il comprenne qu'il y a plusieurs espèces de violences, qu'il y a la violence contre la violence."³⁴

If "all is violence," for Sartre, one had to choose between just and unjust violence, between passivity and an active compromise with the exigencies of political action, between quietism and "counterviolence." Sartre's notion of "la violence contre la violence" takes "counterviolence" into the realm of political

practice, as a recuperable or justifiable violence deployed toward the end of freedom. I should clarify that my use of the term “counterviolence” in this book has been exclusively limited to the sphere of representations. The current global escalation of terror in the name of competing projects of liberation makes it difficult to endorse Sartre’s defense of a legitimate counterviolent praxis. Yet his inquiry into the visible *and* invisible structures of domination that give rise to such counterviolence retains its power today.³⁵

Camus’s wartime experience also led him to realize that, as a historical agent, an individual needed to choose between courses of action with injurious consequences. Yet, as an intellectual, he adamantly refused to offer a theoretical sanction to violence, regardless of the justness of the cause. His fiction returns to the forms and dangers of such legitimations, suggesting that literature’s ethical imperative is to create the grounds for refusing our consent to the logic—as well as the fact—of terror.

My reading of Camus’s oeuvre has foregrounded the importance of irony for a critique of violence that remains attentive to its own potential violence, and that opens the imagination to human pain and vulnerability in different times and places. As we have seen throughout these readings, irony takes the shape of the enemy; its weapons are fashioned out of the same metal as the edifices it contests. The ironic critique is necessarily an impure path that fully contaminates the position of the ironist. Yet it is this impurity that gives the ironic critique its ongoing relevance and energy. The reenactment of “terror” as a dynamic operation in *La Chute* beckons the reader to wrestle with the multiple positions s/he occupies in the continuing reality of historical violence. For Camus, as for the Baudelairean committed ironists whose legacy this book has traced, it is only when we grapple with the complexity of our historical embedding, as alternately—and even simultaneously—victim, executioner, accomplice, and collaborator in the violence that we witness, that the possibility of a just community can emerge. Irony is the first step toward a more differentiated understanding of our own historical positioning, and toward a community whose members can claim to be “ni victime, ni bourreau.”