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## The Paradox of Ideology, Identity, and Judgment: A Žižekian Analysis of Camus' *The Fall*

**Sarah Kruse, Portland State University USA.**

According to Slavoj Žižek, the repressed is not so much a return of the past as it is paradoxically a return of the future. How is this possible? In a Lacanian world, meaning is never a truth that can be found; it is rather always an entity constructed. Žižek would explain this as a function of the Lacanian symptom because “symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively – the analysis produces truth” (Žižek 1992: 56). This creation of retroactive meaning is best expressed in the form of narrative which essentially gives coherence to unstructured events. While literature is always working inside the constraints of narrative, Camus 1957 masterpiece *The Fall* engages narrative in a unique way. The protagonist is the only character who ever speaks. While some have criticized this structure as strange, in Žižekian terms this confession emphasizes the importance of the narrative articulation of the symptom to the protagonist's identity and ideology. Read through a Žižekian lens, Camus' character becomes the perfect embodiment of how the Symbolic network, the intrusion of the Real, and the symptom function in the constructions of an individual's identity. The main character, Clamence, exemplifies an individual enmeshed in the Symbolic as he is a lawyer turned judge-penitent whose universe is ordered around a Master signifier of judgment. His narration is structured around a traumatic break from an experience on a bridge that becomes the intrusion of the Real on his ideology of the law. It is only through the narrative to his interlocutor that he is able to construct a sense of his positive identity, but it is an identity that nevertheless becomes a repetition of the identity he was trying to escape because the fall back into ideology is

inescapable.

In Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the Symbolic, adapted by Slavoj Žižek, an individual structures both identity and environment through the narratives one creates. If it is true, as Camus claims in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that the Absurd may strike a man in the face at anytime on a street corner, what we are in spite of this becomes an urgent question. If I ask myself how to find a universal articulation of self, it seems I need turn no further than the art of narration. To convey something one knows of the world seems futile, for everything we come to know, to some extent, exists because we create it. Nothing exists except through how it is perceived. Conversely, then, it seems perception becomes a creative principle that, in fact, structures existence. There seems no outside to this system, for we are made and enslaved by the same principle. How to solve this paradox becomes an impossibility, for the limit of what *is* and the truth of what *is not* simultaneously create a "center and circumference" within the subject; only within the positive system of a belief or ideology does identity seem to exist. Here we may turn to contemporary philosophy.

Within the Symbolic order of language exists a gap, a fissure. In Žižekian terms, the Real opens this void. The Symbolic is forever incomplete because the Real always intrudes and disrupts order; nonetheless, both depend on the other's existence. In terms of narrative and confession, it seems man exists and lives a life that he accepts as his own, then one day, the curtain falls, or the scrim is lifted and what safely seemed one's life is proven a delicately crafted artifice. The individual is left with nothing or no-thing, for what seemed concrete becomes only shadows. However, for Clamence, this failure, or fissure in his exquisite created canvas was always there. It seems this horror, this fissure, originally creates the picture called "I."<sup>1</sup> To exist is to create pictures and then learn to live with them. The created picture in *The Fall* seems the law that is the Symbolic Law that attempts to order reality. Here lies Clamence's difficulty.

### **Clamence and *The Fall***

The realization of false belief in Camus' *The Fall* is almost immediately perceptible. The protagonist, Clamence, seeks the companionship of an unseen interlocutor in a bar in Amsterdam, but immediately his conversational, self-deprecating, and wry remarks set the tone of the novel as a kind of confession that seeks the reader's confidence. It is on this atmosphere and Clamence's attitude that most critics have commented. Philip Thody remarks that behind Clamence's realization, his real motivations are "to look down on people from the height of his own perfection and be able to despise them because of his own virtue" (Thody 1961: 174). Clamence's pride has often been read as "setting a trap to catch clear consciences and destroy the peace of mind of the bourgeoisie" (Thody 1961: 181), and also as Camus' critique of the French intellectual movement.

In this respect, one understands how further arguments have developed advocating

Clamence as an inauthentic representation of man, and, conversely, as Camus' mouthpiece for commentary on the times, for Clamence's cynicism could be read either way. Germaine Brée finds him the emblem of an "attitude" (Brée 1964: 132) through which "Camus once again is fighting his enemy nihilism this time which has reduced man's 'conscience' to an endless, formless, chaotic parade of inner consciousness, a fascinating show upon which the outer law of a disintegrating society has no control because the distance is too great between the inner 'I' and the mirror held up to it from outside" (Brée 1964: 134). Brée believes that it is the dissolution between the individual and society's social fabric that consciousness pushes to a moment of crisis and against which Clamence struggles.

However, if we view society as secondary to Clamence's experience, that is, a perfect society is only a nostalgic image, not a reality, "always already" disintegrating, the occurrence of the fall, then, resides within man. A clearer picture of Camus novel comes into view if one recognizes Clamence's inability to escape repetition not as Camus' condemnation of society's systems, but rather as the framing of a fundamental human problem. For it seems, as in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Clamence is unable to escape repetition because its roots lay in human thought and the ideology that we live by. This realization, for Sisyphus, is the moment when the rock falls, and "Sisyphus returning toward his rock, . . . contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death" (Camus 1955: 91). He is trapped in a world of his creating, but accepts this willingly; it is Sisyphus' continuance that simultaneously leaves him the absurd hero, but also renders him "happy." In *The Fall*, if Clamence has one point to make, it seems this: the voice crying in the wilderness of a "false prophet for shabby times" is not one that proclaims what will or should be, but is merely one who states what *is*.

If it can be argued that Meursault refuses to lie, as in the 1955 preface (Camus 1968: 336), that he will not capitulate to the system, and the price he must pay is through his execution, then the reverse may be argued for Clamence who is essentially Meursault's opposite. Instead of his resistance to the law, he is, in fact, an embodiment of the law, for within the space of the novel, we learn Clamence has been a lawyer and is now a judge-penitent. Because of his inherent relationship to the law, Clamence can only critique the system he is entrapped in through a failure of that system. While Meursault's breaking point results from his passive action of "murder," Clamence's breaking point results from his active supposition that he witnessed a suicide.

Through this encounter with "death" Clamence questions his beliefs because it introduces self-doubt. In his self doubt, Clamence realizes that he is not the inherently "good" person he thought he was, but rather that his actions only mask his actual narcissistic tendencies. Through his narration to his companion, he retroactively reads "true" meaning into his past actions; however, in doing so, he recreates another system and "falls" back into the judgments he was trying to escape. Thus, "The Last Judgment . . . [that] takes place everyday" (Camus 1957:111) in

*The Fall* does not belong to any transcendental Law, but rather “always already” exists and is at work in human thought. Camus implicates everyone as inherently guilty, and as such, the only authentic “fall” is from the ideology of innocence that we have created.

### **Slavoj meets Albert**

If paradox is perhaps the only “truth” possible in a postmodern world where the breakdown of everything from religion to language occurs, the only thing that remains is impossibility itself. However negative this may be, it is still an entity that *exists*. In this respect, we may further understand the psychoanalytic registers adopted by Žižek of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. A critical facet of these registers is their interdependency on one another, particularly that of the Symbolic and the Real. Yet even with this codependency, apparent contradictions arise. Žižek defines the Real in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* as “the starting point, the basis, the foundation of the process of symbolization . . . that is, the Real . . . in a sense *precedes* the symbolic order and is subsequently structured by it when it gets caught in its network” (Žižek 1989:169). However, he also asserts that “the Real is the fullness of the inert presence . . . the lack is introduced only by the symbolization; it is a signifier which introduces a void . . . . But at the same time the Real is in itself a hole, a gap, an opening in the middle of the symbolic order— it is the lack around which the symbolic order is structured” (Žižek 1989: 170).

If these statements both contradict themselves and each other, it seems the only way to make sense of them is through paradox, for we must remember that both conditions are necessary. Symbolization both creates a structure and a lack; the Real is both a foundation and a void. If both terms are everything and nothing, how can any positive value be assigned to either? The answer is, it cannot. What occurs then is an erasure of any teleological possibility within these terms. It is this point that seems crucial, for a continual process must arise that is always in play between these two terms. Here, perhaps, is an explanation of why Žižek claims that “[t]he *symbolic* relation is . . . differential: the identity of each of the moments consists in its difference to the opposite moment” (Žižek 1989: 171). Positive existence or identity rests on difference; it is only through opposition that things positively exist. The Symbolic order creates “existence” and “positive identity,” but as such, it is also never complete *because* it is a positive entity; the Real is, conversely, a “fullness of inert presence” because it *is* nothing; its very nothingness will always “resist symbolization” because that which can be symbolized exists. Moreover, movement, not progress, persists because of these two entities. It seems this movement becomes a kind of paradoxical dialect, that is, a dialectic contained *within* the positive subject, not between the subject and Other. This dialectic constitutes existence not because it achieves “truth,” but because it is the lack of stasis.

This inescapable movement seems present in Camus’ *The Fall* where Clamence recounts

his life to a listener in a bar in Amsterdam. As a lawyer who advocated “noble cases” against unfair judgment in the courts, but now is a self-proclaimed judge-penitent, his positive identity seems enmeshed in the law. The law, in a strict Žižekian sense, becomes the Symbolic order as the structure that allows for Clamence’s positive existence.<sup>2</sup> As long as he is able to identify with the Symbolic order, all is well. It is when he doubts himself and questions his ideology that his former identity as advocate begins to break down. And yet if we are working within the idea of paradox, even at this moment of the “fall,” there is no “real” escape from the Symbolic. As soon as Clamence identifies himself as a judge-penitent, he has already re-entered the system. Nevertheless, this continual inescapable process would not be possible without the negation of the Real, without something for him to react against.

Within the Symbolic structure of the law, the idea of judgment seems that from which Clamence derives both pleasure (in judging others) and fear (from a Law of self-doubt).<sup>3</sup> Within the law, judgment, as a kind of Žižekian master-signifier, seems to possess paradoxical qualities because it is both an absolute *thing* in the Symbolic, and is an empty signifier when stripped of its ideological mask. Indeed, to work within paradoxical dialectics, Judgment must have two sides. It exists as “judgment” within the Symbolic because the law has incorporated it successfully. At this level, it seems even to uphold the system, for when the law is broken, judgment in the courts restores order. However, as a master-signifier of the Law, it is also empty, nothing, a dangerous traumatic kernel. Without the mask of ordering law, judgment becomes Judgment, or as it seems Camus would perhaps call it, “the Last Judgment.” Not that this is actual judgment at all, rather it is an intrusion of the Real that threatens the Symbolic order, but also gives it consistency. When this traumatic kernel has been covered over or incorporated into the Symbolic, the apocalyptic Last Judgment becomes the judgment of the law. As such, it seems the traumatic kernel that Clamence must continually try to integrate into his Symbolic world also maintains his positive identity.

The continual attempt of integration seems to be a quality of existence itself. Furthermore, integration seems the Lacanian/Žižekian symptom which must find new ways to mask eruptions of the Real and interpret them as encoded remnants of the Symbolic, which reveals Clamence’s need for narrative. It is only through the creation of a story that he is able to confront the traumatic events of his past and simultaneously create an identity for himself through those events. His story is his ideology that fulfills the need for signification. The presence of the interlocutor who never speaks is absolutely necessary for Clamence because the listener takes the place of the other, the one presumed to know, through which meaning must be created. In the wake of his Symbolic failure and transference of Symbolic power onto his listener, Clamence’s symptom arises, but it is only through the paradox of his belief and his breakdown of belief that this process is possible. His “fall” is the fall from ideology back into ideology that is never complete because the paradox of process is *all* that exists. The fall “always already” occurs at dawn, but it is within the process of his symptom that we must imagine Clamence happy.

## The Žižekian/Lacanian Symbolic

Ideology, however, is not synonymous with the Symbolic. Ideology is produced by the subject to cover the gap in the Symbolic; whereas, it seems the Symbolic is an entity that the subject enters. In Lacan's essay "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," he claims that language should not be confused with the ways in which humans use it: "The primary reason for this is that language, with its structure, exists prior to each subject's entry into it at a certain moment in his mental development" (Lacan 2006: 413). Language, and therefore the Symbolic as well, is not something that we use, but something that uses us, hence Lacan's explanation for why/how language directs us "where to go." The signifier, for Lacan, is not simply an arbitrary sign, but in fact, "enters the signified—namely, in a form which, since it is not immaterial, raises the question of its place in reality" (Lacan 2006: 417). Since language, in the strict Lacanian sense, both enters "reality" as an entity and is reality, it seems it cannot help but affect the subject, and "while [the subject] may appear to be the slave of language, [he] is still more the slave of a discourse in the universal movement of which his place is already inscribed at his birth, if only in the form of his proper name" (Lacan 2006: 414). Thus, the ruling of the Symbolic order directly affects the reality of the subject. Once the subject enters existence, complete escape from the Symbolic seems almost impossible. Clamence is, indeed, already inscribed by the Symbolic order, for in the beginning we learn that he was originally content as a lawyer. His pre-prescribed place was already marked; it is only through his doubt that his world begins to show fissures.

If the Symbolic is an entity that the subject enters, it seems the Symbolic can never encompass the complete subject, which perhaps is why Žižek focuses on the gap in the Symbolic. Žižek concludes that "the analysis is thus conceived as a symbolization, a symbolic integration of meaningless imaginary traces [that imply] a fundamentally imaginative character of the unconscious . . . it is something, which, thanks to the symbolic progress which takes place in the analysis, *will have been*" (Žižek 1989: 55). The Symbolic integrates that which is meaningless to produce a coherent narrative for the subject. However, there is always an unintelligible leftover. This flaw or gap then must somehow be dressed within the Symbolic for the system to function. According to Žižek, successful integration is only possible through repetition of the traumatic event that will then find its place in the Symbolic order (Žižek 1989: 61). Repetition is necessary because it is a "repayment of our symbolic debt" which also "announces the advent of the Law" (Žižek 1989: 61). That is, our "symbolic debt" is that which must be repeated because it is unknowable, undefinable. But the nature of repetition itself is double as Žižek explains in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* where there is a "difference between repetition *qua* traumatic encounter with the Real: the repetition of a signifier repeats the symbolic *trait unaire*, the mark to which the object is reduced, and thus constitutes the ideal order of the Law, where as "traumatism" designates precisely the reemergent failure to integrate some "impossible" kernel of the Real" (Žižek 1992: 91). When the

event can be translated into a signifier, its repetition becomes a part of the law. When it can only be experienced in its traumatism, even if it is a repetition, it becomes an act.

Thus, the law then becomes a necessity to the coherence of the Symbolic order, but as a constituent, it is also inherently empty, a materialization that contains no meaning. This seems the absurdity of the superego command with its injunction of both “no” and “enjoy” (the Lacanian *nom de père* and *non de père*). The paradox of the superego exists through the integration of the “imaginary unconscious” and its existence in the Symbolic. The need to give meaning to what is meaningless creates a paradox within the law, which is neatly masked when viewed from the perspective of its existence in the Symbolic where it has been repeated as a signifier.

## **Symbolic Judgment**

Yet, if the “unconscious is structured like a language and is a language,” according to Lacan, it seems there is no escape from this ordering principle. Everything, once it has entered existence, seems trapped in the Symbolic register. The same holds true for Clamence; he is entrapped by the Symbolic order of both law and religion. Ironically, he denounces both through the course of the novel, although he inextricably belongs to both. He cannot escape the law in his profession as first lawyer and then judge-penitent, nor can he escape the religious inscribing of his name, Jean-Baptiste Clamence. The irony of this situation illustrates the Symbolic order’s inescapability that becomes an effect of the “fall.”

From the beginning of the novel, where Clamence claims his original motives as a lawyer were because “[i]t set me above the judge whom I judged in turn, above the defendant whom I forced to gratitude” (Camus 1957: 25), to the end where as judge-penitent, he admits that “the more I accuse myself, the more I have a right to judge you” (Camus 1957: 140), Clamence remains unchanged in character. He sees from a different angle (perhaps from the view of looking awry, from the anamorphic spot), but he is unable to change. He returns to the same pattern in which he started because there is no “outside” to ideology and repetition is inherent to the Symbolic. He falls from his initial ideology that he is upholding justice, but he continues to perpetuate a new ideology that is essentially the same. In this sense, Clamence’s fall is similar to Sisyphus’ rock that he can never succeed in pushing up the mountain; Clamence must repeat his actions until death.

Here, perhaps, lies the connection between death and the fall. Death is the only entity that stops constant repetition, but we know for Clamence that this is not possible; he loves life too much, and thus he is condemned to perpetual repetition. A fragment of the original Freudian “death drive” seems to cling to the idea of the “Last Judgment” insofar as it opens the gap in ideology that threatens continuation, and because of this, it must be incorporated into the law as the repetition of (small) judgment. Within the Symbolic workings of the law, judgment is palatable; it can be explained away rationally. As Clamence states, “He who clings to a law does not fear the judgment

that reinstates him in an order he believes in. But the keenest of human torments is to be judged without a law. Yet we are in that torment” (Camus 1957: 117). As long as judgment exists within the Symbolic, it remains a confrontation safely inscribed within definable limits. When the structure is removed, judgment becomes Judgment that is torment because it has *nothing* to fall back on, or rather *into*. It perhaps is the ultimate Absurd confrontation for Camus. In Žižekian terms, it introduces the traumatic kernel unmasked, the terrifying *thing* that resists symbolization; it is the gap that the positive subject must paper-over with ideology if he/she is to maintain identity as a subject. This is why Clamence never fully escapes his beliefs even when he acknowledges them as allegedly “false.” Despite what he confronts, his ideology supports his positive identity. Without his judgment of others, without his Symbolic inscription within the order of the law, and without his self-proclaimed religious associations, all of which he recognizes as hollow ideas, the identity of the subject Jean-Baptiste Clamence would cease to exist.

He must remain within control of the Symbolic order. Indeed, everything about him exudes this idea. As narrator, he creates through language the only version of the story we know. His listener never speaks and is only known to exist through Clamence’s spoken acknowledgments. In our first glimpse of Clamence, his past role as lawyer/mediator between client and law is mirrored in his mediation between the listener and the bartender because of a gap in language (the bartender “speaks nothing but Dutch” (Camus 1957: 3)). His role is to fill the gap between the subject and the law. Indeed, he is so enmeshed in the Symbolic that he almost becomes an embodiment of the Symbolic’s organizing principles. When he jocularly exclaims that the bartender is “the Cro-Magnon man lodged in the Tower of Babel” (Camus 1957: 4), it highlights the lack of language and confusion of language in *Mexico City*, as well as the ideology of a perfect language. We know by the novel’s end that he has chosen *Mexico City* as his “office” and his “church” as judge-penitent; however, it seems because he is within the chaos of language (this Tower of Babel) that he must work here to his mandate of the law (his Symbolic order).

When Clamence points out an “empty rectangle marking the place where a picture [had] been taken down” (Camus 1957: 5) in *Mexico City*, it is as if he is drawing our attention to a gap or void in the Symbolic. By the end of the novel, we learn that Clamence actually possesses what turns out to be the stolen painting of “The Just Judges.” The picture, perhaps, becomes an image of ideology, a representation of an impossibility in reality that exists only in form. Clamence harbors this painting because it incorporates both religion and law which are the points that constitute his ideology and also enslave him. But only through his constructed narrative is the picture itself revealed.

Clamence’s gesture of controlling the Symbolic also accounts for his terms of endearment directed towards his listener. He moves from *Monsieur*, to *cher Monsieur*, to *mon cher compatriote*, to *cher ami*, to *mon cher*, and finally concludes with *cher maître*. From the perspective of the Symbolic, the ever increasing use of personal addresses subtly entraps and enslaves the listener



to Clamence's Symbolic order of language, while his final enunciation of *cher maître* is the completion of his signifying process, the final transference of power to the Other, the "master," the one-supposed-to-know, that allows for the "quilting" of signification that creates self and identity. This power is, perhaps, Clamence's final realization, for ultimate control is found not through judicial or religious law, but rather through the law of language. Even though Clamence recognizes that he is "in the torment" of Judgment without law, he declares: "Fortunately, *I* arrived! I am the end and the beginning; I announce the law. In short, I am a judge-penitent" (Camus 1957: 118). He creates the law through his language as narrator, for he must become both the religious and judicial scribe of the Symbolic to sustain his identity in the face of the Absurd Last Judgment. It is where the Symbolic fails, where Clamence is left without language, that we catch a glimpse of the lack itself, of that which resists symbolization, indeed, the terrifying and idiotic kernel of the Žižekian Real.

### The Žižekian Real

Before we go further, we first must understand the deeper implications of how Žižek uses the Lacanian concept of the Real. Lacan's well known definition of the Real is "that which resists symbolization." But the important factor that Žižek emphasizes, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, is that even though the Real is this impossible kernel, in itself is nothing, it is absolutely needed to support the Symbolic: "Whenever we have a symbolic structure it is structured around a certain void, it implies the foreclosure of a certain key-signifier" (Žižek 1989: 73). The key-signifier is the very *Thing* the symbolic structure seems to attempt to totalize. It constitutes the boundary that makes enclosure of the system possible, and yet simultaneously, it seems an "eccentric center" that cannot be contained. The idea of a "key signifier" seems an impossibility, but it is this very impossibility that makes it possible to construct a system. The signifier exists in the Symbolic, but only insofar as it is impossible to actually exist. This possible impossibility is then a "structural necessity" because, to quote Žižek,

there is always a residue, a leftover, a stain of traumatic irrationality . . . , and *that this leftover, far from hindering the full submission of the ideological command, is the very condition of it*: it is precisely this non-integrated surplus of senseless traumatism which confers on the Law its unconditional authority: . . . [it] sustains . . . the ideological jouissance, enjoyment-in-sense (enjoy-ment) proper to ideology. (Žižek 1989: 43-44)

The impossibility of the signifier then constructs the system because the system itself is an attempt to attain that which cannot be attained because of its own existence and creation. However, if desire could attain its object/cause, there would be no Symbolic structure. There would be no need for one. It is precisely because of desire for the unobtainable that anything exists. This seems why

Žižek uses the idea of “antagonism” as an instance of something manifest that is Real.

In his essay “The Spectre of Ideology,” Žižek propounds that social antagonism is Real, that this is the one point in Marx that is not subject to ideology (Žižek 1999: 74). Why? For one reason: it is never at rest, so it could not be totalized, but more importantly, it seems because it is Real. That is, it essentially *does not* exist. How are we to make sense of this paradox? We must remember that all meaning is created retroactively. In Žižek’s thinking, there is nothing that exists as an absolute truth outside of conceptual thought. With this in mind, we begin to see how “class struggle” or “antagonism” is Real. It becomes a point that is retroactively constituted by the ideology that is in place; however, paradoxically, ideology could not symbolize “class struggle” unless it affected the system. All systems contain a lack, and it is therefore this lack that must be colonized into the ideology for it to run smoothly. The thing in the system that is named as the impossibility of the system’s closure is the Real masked as a signifier. Because ideology arises in opposition to this traumatic kernel of the Real, the Real becomes the “center” of the ideology, which ideology can never escape. This is why antagonism as an entity is “only to be constructed retroactively, from a series of its effects, as the traumatic point which escapes them; it prevents closure of the social field” (Žižek 1989: 163-64). The Real as impossible entity within the field becomes the point that the Symbolic structure cannot incorporate and simultaneously is also why the Symbolic exists at all. This prevents the possibility of the Hegelian “synthesis” which if possible, would actually be the “real” end of the system.

Using what Žižek calls Hegel’s “radical anti-evolutionism” (Žižek 1989: 144) of absolute negativity, the impossibility of the Real becomes absolutely necessary for the Symbolic to function. “Absolute negativity” is nothing less than what it seems, absolute negation, lack of all movement; essentially, it is the Lacanian/Freudian “death drive,” or that which seeks total stasis. But what Žižek radically proposes is that “the suspension of movement is a key moment in the dialectical process” (Žižek 1989: 144). The dialectical process for Žižek is not a teleological progression of modification from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, but rather is a continual annihilation and beginning of the same beginning and ending (Žižek 1989: 144). There is no “progress” towards a better end, rather only the continual process towards the same end that will ceaselessly repeat itself, much like Sisyphus with his rock.

Here we begin to understand Žižek’s concept of the place between “two deaths.” It seems that the two deaths consist of action and of ideas. To die physically is not enough, nor is it enough to die only symbolically. An individual must undergo the process of both because both are paradoxically and fundamentally the facets that buoy up an individual as subject. The subject is the embodiment of the Real in the Symbolic (the inexplicable traumatic kernel that resists symbolization), and subsequently, the failure of that symbolization because he is Real. However, what the subject thinks his identity is, is really the Symbolic structure, not the failure of the structure that is authentic Self. Here is why Lacan must reverse the Cartesian *cogito* to “I am thinking where

I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking” (Lacan 2006: 430).

The individual becomes entrapped in the system that he believes to be his identity, and to a degree, this system is identity, if identity is considered a positive entity. But if the complexity of the Self is that of an absolute negative, only the failure of the Symbolic will reveal this. However, as a functioning individual, the person will struggle to hold onto that comprehensible positive element of identity, which unfortunately for the subject is not the center of Self: “My positive identity is a kind of ‘reaction formation’ to a certain traumatic antagonistic kernel: if I lose this ‘impossible’ point of reference, my identity dissolves” (Žižek 1989: 176). Identity is created around the impossible void of Self.

Here we again see the fundamental importance of the Real to the constructed system; only here, it is within the system of the individual. The traumatic kernel of the Real is the element which the subject creates “positive identity” around in reaction to the encounter of the Real. Without this kernel that the subject reacts *against*, the identity of the subject would not exist. Thus, this is absolute negativity for Žižek: “The negation of the negation does not in any way abolish the antagonism, it consists only in the experience of the fact that this immanent limit which is preventing me from achieving my full identity with myself simultaneously enables me to achieve a minimum of positive consistency, however mutilated it is” (Žižek 1989: 176). In other words, the gap or lack of the Real that inhibits the individual from becoming “complete” within the field of the system paradoxically is the *same* element that makes any positive type of identification possible. Thus, the Real always returns as the origin of the “center and circumference” that constitutes the ideology of the individual subject.

### **Clarence After the Cut**

Through these claims, we now begin to understand the unusual situation of Clarence in *The Fall*. Clarence’s positive identity is constructed on the basis of his judgment of others in order to elevate himself. And so his positive identity as a subject rests on the impossible traumatic kernel of Judgment. However, we know from Žižek that this positive identification is also a lack; it is the mutilated individual, not the authentic Self. Authentic Self is only visible at a point of failure in the system that the individual thought was his constructed identity. This moment for Clarence materializes as the moment on the bridge where he thinks he has witnessed a suicide.

It is here that he begins to doubt himself in all his confidence, and the kernel of judgment that he constructed his ideology around turns on him as failure and becomes self-Judgment through which his positive identity begins to deteriorate. As Clarence declares, “Let’s not give them any pretext, no matter how small, for judging us! Otherwise, we’ll be left in shreds . . . . I realized that all at once the moment I had suspicion that maybe I wasn’t so admirable. From then on, I became distrustful. Since I was bleeding slightly, there was no escape for me; they would

devour me” (Camus, 1957: 78). He is now vulnerable to the world’s judgment of him, but he is vulnerable because of the change within him, not in the world. The Real that his belief masked has been penetrated by an intrusion of the Real. The Žižekian cut has been made, or as Clamence calls it, a wound. It is only *après coup*, or after the cut of the Real that the narrative or the effect of meaning is possible. Clamence cannot articulate his symptom until after the trauma of the Real has pierced the structure of his perceived identity.

Clearly the incident at the bridge is an inexplicable instance of the Real. The setting is past “midnight” with “few people on the streets” when Clamence passes a young girl on the Pont Royal. Once past her, he believes he hears a body hit the water and then,

Almost at one I heard a cry, repeated several times which was going down-stream; then it suddenly ceased. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable. I wanted to run and yet didn’t stir . . . . I told myself that I had to be quick and I felt an irresistible weakness steal over me. I have forgotten what I thought then. ‘Too late, too far . . .’ or something of that sort. Then, slowly under the rain, I went away. I informed no one . . . . The next day, and the days following, I didn’t even read the papers. (Camus 1957: 70-71)

The implication of death perhaps suggests an instance of the Real as a final negation, but more important is the affect it has on Clamence, which is actually stronger if it is not a “real” suicide at all because it literally leaves him with no-thing. The very setting the cessation of sound, the silence, the interminable night, his weakness, forgetting, not informing, and not reading the papers are all traits and gestures that point toward cessation of movement, action, and even language itself which is so vital to the Symbolic order. Reading the paper would give the event a Symbolic context, but for Clamence since this is the breaking point, the cut in his ideology, this moment resists symbolization.

The event cannot be externally explained because it is an intrusion on Clamence’s ideology. An outside explanation would perhaps only fail because the incident would still retain the trauma for the subject. He becomes totally passive in this situation because this moment carries with it the “death drive.” Not only the “death drive” in the sense that it is the “revolt” of his past history, but that it is equally the “negation of the negation.” It constitutes the moment of negation of the subject through the negation that was masked in the identifying construct; world judgment becomes self-Judgment for Clamence, and the Symbolic’s failure to function in this moment brings the world to a point of stillness, a point of no-thingness.

However, this stilling of the world, this negation, is also what creates “dialectical progression,” in the Žižekian sense. After the fall, through negation —Judgment—the subject must begin again. Not from a new point, but merely to begin again from the same starting point. Action can only be repeated. The subject must then come to terms with this intrusion of the Real; its meaning must be “uncovered” retroactively through the process of the system. However, since

“progression” is not possible, the subject will continue to reconstruct the same identity. The “synthesis” is only the antithesis again except viewed from a slightly different angle (Žižek 1989: 176). This is why Clamence becomes judge-penitent. His identity is a similar repetition of his life as a lawyer, and he again, by the end of the novel, admits the same flaws with which he started; only now, the angle he approaches them from is altered. However, it is only through the progress of narration or the process of working through his symptom that he is able to articulate these changes to the listener because he creates meaning by explaining them.

### **The Answer of the Symptom**

The subject cannot remain in the moment of an encounter with the Real if he/she is to remain a positive subject. The traumatic kernel must be explained and meaning must be found in that which is essentially meaningless. This process of re-integration seems the work of the Žižekian symptom. Žižek states in *Sublime Object* that “[w]hat was foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real of the Symptom” (Žižek 1989: 73). It seems the symptom is only necessary when there is a failure in the Symbolic network. If the Symbolic network were an animal wounded by the Real, the symptom would be the remedy that attempts to cure the wound. But failure is first needed for the symptom to articulate itself.

The fall must occur before the narrative can begin: “The symptom arises where the world failed, where the circuit of the symbolic communication was broken: it is a kind of prolongation of the communication by other means; the failed, repressed word articulates itself in a coded, cyphered form” (Žižek 1989: 73). It seems then that the symptom is, in its “real” form, essentially empty; however, because of its placement with the Symbolic, and despite that it is in itself impossible to comprehend, the symptom is imbued with abstract meaning that must be interpreted. This is also why it contains meaning only retroactively. As a past event it is empty, its significance exists only in the future where one can create a meaning for it. It is the *failure* itself that is encased in meaning to stabilize the Symbolic break. This is why the symptom is the “‘return of the repressed’ [and] is an effect which precedes its cause (its hidden kernel, its meaning), and in working through the symptom we are bringing about the past—we are producing the symbolic reality of past, long forgotten, traumatic events” (Žižek 1989: 56-57). Nothing exists until we inscribe that empty space with something. The past only has meaning when we can demarcate it as such through the Symbolic. Here we may again see the paradoxical dialectic at work.

It is not a dialectic that works between two opposite entities, but rather one that only creates itself out of itself in reaction to no-thing. What exists in the past only does so because it already exists in the present. There is nothing other than the Symbolic of the present, and the effect is only known because it is all that exists in the present. The presence of memory is all that ever exists of the past. The past as an empirical reality does not exist: “The paradox then is that the process of

searching itself produces the object which caused it: an exact parallel to the Lacanian desire which produces its own object-cause" (Žižek 1989: 160-161). In this sense, process becomes all that really exists. Meaning and narratives are merely the effects of the search, not the cause.

Furthermore, if the process is all that exists, there can never be a teleological answer to any question that arises because only questions exist. This is why the failed "subject is the answer of the Real" (Žižek 1989: 178) as well. The only answer that can be produced is a failure. This is, a non-answer, for only in impossibility does the system continue. This explains why there is no outside to ideology. Any failure of ideology never moves to a "real" beyond ideology, but rather becomes the new gap an alternate ideology must replace if anything is to exist at all. The subject only accomplishes this process through the transference of "knowledge" on to another; "it is addressed to the big other presumed to contain its meaning. In other words, there is no symptom without its addressee" (Žižek 1989: 73). Since the symptom is trying to re-interpret its own fundamental lack as something to "prolong communication," it must look to an outside "truth." Only then may it continue its search. Without the subject presumed to know, the dialectic of the Symbolic would cease and the positive subject would be condemned to the eternal silence of nothingness itself.

### **Narrator as Analysand**

It is because of this lack that we now begin to understand Clamence's need to have friends, to narrate his story, and to be happy that it is always too late to "save ourselves." In this respect, the whole narrative becomes a necessity for Clamence. His very "failure" to act on the bridge actually constitutes a structural necessity for him to maintain his positive identity within the Symbolic order. If the moment on the bridge is read as a "failure" in the Symbolic where the world's movement is stilled, Clamence's very narration around this event, as an attempt at comprehension becomes his symptom. The actual event of the girl on the bridge is left ambiguous. She could have jumped as well as not; however, what is significant is that Clamence creates something out of this event, to the extent that he finds it necessary to avoid bridges at night.

It is significant that after this point, after the traumatic break of the Real, disembodied laughter haunts Clamence's narrative. The Real always leave a sticky residue; after meaning has been created through the symptom, there is a leftover from symbolization (Žižek 1989: 104). This haunting leftover for Clamence manifests after the bridge incident through his symptom of narrative. The laughter that haunts him throughout the novel is not heard at the time of the incident, but only after the fact. The laughter becomes the *voix*, the voice, the return of the Real that follows the subject after the retroactive meaning has been created. The *voix* or voice is on the side of the object not the subject according to Žižek in his essay "The Undergrowth of Enjoyment." On the side of the object, or that which cannot be totalized, the voice "floating freely in some horrifying

interspace, functions again as a stain or blemish, whose inert presence interferes like a foreign body and prevents me from achieving self-identity” (Žižek 1999: 15). It is the haunting of the impossibility that interrupts any attempt at a totalization of identity which is why so often when Clamence succumbs to self-doubt, he hears the disembodied laughter.

If the incident is not a reality, it is, in fact, more compelling because Clamence has taken what he supposed to be an instance of something traumatic and interprets it. He retroactively gives this moment significance in his past, despite that the “real” details remain forever unknown. The trauma of the event is all that needs to exist for the symptom to arise. The *thing* that creates the symptom can be, or even must be, meaningless in itself. This is perhaps illustrated when Clamence, on an ocean voyage celebrating his “cure” from desire, realizes that his fear of this traumatic moment has never left him:

Suddenly, far off at sea, I perceived a black speck on the steel-grey ocean. I turned away at once and my heart began to beat wildly. When I forced myself to look, the black speck had disappeared. I was on the point of shouting, of stupidly calling for help, when I saw it again. It was one of those bits of refuse that ships leave behind them. Yet I had not been able to endure watching it; for I had thought at once of a drowning person. Then I realized, calmly as you resign yourself to an idea the truth of which you have long known, that that cry which had sounded over the Seine behind me years before had never ceased, carried by the river to the waters of the Channel, to travel throughout the world, across the limitless expanse of the ocean, and that it had waited for me there until the day I had encountered it. I realized likewise that it would continue to await me on seas and rivers, everywhere, in short, where lies the bitter water of my baptism. (Camus, 1957: 108)

This spot or stain (the cry and the laughter) continues to manifest for Clamence because the Symbolic always fails. Yet even when the “reality” of the object as a “bit of refuse” is realized, it still has power over him because it is the spectre of the Real that has no apparent meaning in the Symbolic and is still traumatic. Its momentary disappearance leaves him ready to re-enter the Symbolic order and call for help, but when it resurfaces he is left *speechless*, a clear failure of the Symbolic order. The eloquent lawyer is left *without* language. The thing becomes the piece of the Real that sticks out, the anamorphic spot that must be viewed from a particular angle to see its significance. And like the *objet petit a* that transforms into the disgusting object when approached too closely by the Real of desire, this part of the real for Clamence, when recognized for what it really is, is nothing but an empty piece of refuse.<sup>4</sup> Only the art of narration can mask this inert emptiness, creating a “meaningful” memory of something that essentially has no meaning.

Clamence’s narration brings this past event into the present which explains Clamence’s concern with memory and forgetfulness. If we are to understand the past as existing only in the presence of memory, it is clear why before the “fall,” Clamence mentions how he always forgot everything. Indeed, he observes that he realizes his narcissism “little by little in the period following [that] evening . . . [but] first I had to recover my memory” (Camus 1957: 49). Memory enters

where there was no memory because the symptom for Clamence arises after the cut of the Real and creates the past retroactively. He now has access to memory of past events because he has created their meaning, not because they actually exist. It is this “consciousness” that alters his perception.

For Clamence in his “fallen” state seems to recognize the impossibility of stating what *is* and that behind interpretation, there is nothing. As he says of confessions, (the novel itself has also been called a confession) he has “ceased to like anything but confessions, and authors of confessions write especially to avoid confessing, to tell nothing of what they know” (Camus 1957: 120). What is spoken or written, what exists in the Symbolic, is precisely an avoidance of what *is*. But as symptom, the confession is necessary. It addresses power to another person in an act of transference. This is why Clamence’s last address to the listener is *cher maître* which is both the courtesy title of lawyers and the name “master.” The transference places the listener as both mediator and master through which the “analysand” Clamence can now speak (Camus 1957: 147). The confession as the symptom gives meaning to that which has no meaning through its restoration of a big Other that reinstates the fissured Symbolic order; it recreates the impossible possibility of a master-signifier, of *something* that will reveal “meaning.” The symptom interprets and masks what is Real, which, ironically, is nothing. As with Sisyphus, this moment is both a moment of purpose and of failure. As Camus declares, “It is during that return . . . that Sisyphus interests me. . . . That hour like a breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock” (Camus: 1955: 89). Even confronted with nothing, one still follows the impulse to create. Language and narrative are both man’s creation and identity.

Thus, the repetition of Sisyphus and Clamence is inevitable because in Žižekian terms “there is no outside to ideology.” Sisyphus’ perpetual movement and Clamence’s continued need for judgment and narrative are the positive constituents that make their identity possible. But the paradox of the situation is that without a failure in that system or the Symbolic order, without Sisyphus’ rolling rock and Clamence’s self-doubt, there would be no need for repetition. Only in reworking the initial moment of failure and return for Camus and the gap in ideology for Žižek is meaning possible. What interests Camus as the “hour of consciousness” is, perhaps, for Žižek the moment that ideology becomes necessary. Rather than finding the tension between what potentially could be an authentic moment of consciousness and an inauthentic creation of ideology, we may look at both as the necessary creation of meaning that arises from a confrontation with the Real. It is this paradoxical dialectic that, perhaps, gives us insight into what it is to be human in an Absurd world. Rather than valorizing or condemning, it is enough to say that this is simply what *is*. There may be no endeavor that is not as futile as Sisyphus’ rock or subject to ideology, but it is, perhaps, the acceptance of this that begets happiness. All we are ever left with is our created



sublime objects of ideology.

The need to mask and to find meaning through narrative indeed seems the thrust of Camus' novel. In the end, Clamence declares of the incident on the bridge, "It will always be too late. Fortunately!" (Camus 1957: 147). It will always be impossible to ever fully encounter the Real, but it is paradoxically only in this failure that existence is possible. Existence as process is never complete. The only completion possible is through negation. To exist seems not to find "truth," but to live in the moment of the fall, to create that which will never be enough, will only ever be a failure, but will exist nonetheless. It seems perhaps for both Žižek and Camus, the only answer is not an answer, but the continual process of questioning. The paradoxical dialectic of the subject within which he is "always already" inscribed produces not truth, but the subject's identity. "Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art" and within that unceasing repetition of self-creation we, perhaps, must imagine ourselves happy.

## Notes

1 The idea of a picture here is borrowed from Wittgenstein where in his *Philosophical Investigations*, he states, "A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (#115). This is, perhaps, similar to Lacan's notion of how we use language, but also how language uses us discussed later.

2 Note how his relations with women and his primary narcissism for feeling elevated also place him on a fundamental level closer to the Imaginary register because he is constantly trying to fulfill immediate desires.

3 The use of capitals here is to designate the difference between terms lacking in Symbolic order and those which have been successfully incorporated.

4. Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* would, perhaps, call this the confrontation with the Absurd, for what begets the Absurd experience is not anything in concrete existence itself, but man's desire for knowledge in a universe that has no meaning: "Sin is not so much knowing . . . as wanting to know" (Camus 1955: 36-37).

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