INTRODUCTION

Camus, *Philosophe?*

1 Enigma

“My profession is double, like the human being,”¹ Jean-Baptiste Clamence tells us in *The Fall (La Chute)*, at the end of our first day with him at the *Mexico City*. Like nearly everything in this archeology of Albert Camus’ books, these words can be read as an ironic confession of the author himself. As Clamence taunts us: “I know what you’re thinking: it’s very hard to disentangle the true from the false in what I’m saying.”²

Certainly, the reader who returns to Camus’ *oeuvre* today, especially if she looks to do this by availing herself of the voluminous critical responses it has provoked, soon enters a forest of contradictions. From the very beginning, the two most famous, lay understandings of Camus (each in fact reflecting a different stage in his short life’s work) completely negate each other. On one side, Camus is still today a “prophet of the absurd,” especially for many culturally conservative critics. He is to be aligned with Beckett, the surrealists, and before them Nietzsche, as one more way-station on the West’s long path towards the nihilistic abyss. Yet for Breton, Jeanson, and Sartre in the early 1950s, as differently since for figures like Bronner, Camus represents less a “nihilist” than an incorrigible moralist:³ in the title of Jeanson’s famous polemic, a *belle âme* too beautiful for political life, if not the eloquent high priest of bourgeois reaction against Marxism, the inescapable political horizon of our times.⁴

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2 F, 119. For a more detailed assessment of *The Fall*, see Chapter Six.
The paradoxes in Camus reception only begin there. On the religious question, for instance, Camus stands condemned or celebrated by many critics for being a doctrinaire atheist, alongside Sartre and many others of his time. Yet other commentators, including deeply religious authors like Thomas Merton, continue to find in Camus an interlocutor almost uniquely open to the sacral dimensions of human experience in a century whose most renowned intellectuals were often pre-emptively anti-theological.

In the literary field, Maurice Blanchot, considering only Camus' earliest cycle of works, already expressed consternation that Camus could so well depict the absurd “divorce” between human beings and their world in *L'Étranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, only to end the latter meditation by imagining his absurd icon, Sisyphus, *heureux*. For André Breton and his surrealist followers at *Arts* and *Libertatoire* (and with some variation, also George Bataille)