

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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A LENTEN MEDITATION ON *THE FALL*

Richard V. Horner

One reason that great literature moves us as it does is that it touches us at some point in our experience that is universally human and profound. Whether it be a novel or a musical, an opera or a movie, art resonates with something deep that we recognize in ourselves. It touches our longings, desires, and hopes or our sense of failure or shame; it recalls a love deepened or a love lost; it brings laughter or tears that put us in touch with something profoundly wonderful; it awakens remembrance; it liberates. Works of art may evoke these experiences in quite different ways, but in each case the best art grasps something deeply human and provokes us to wonder how we might understand these experiences and what it means to be human.

Albert Camus does just this sort of thing in *The Fall*, a short novel that he wrote just before he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. I hesitate to ruin a good read for you, so if you have not had occasion to read Camus' novel, you might want to put this essay down, go read the book, and then come back to this commentary as the afterthought that it ought to be. I am about to tell you more than you might want to know and thereby undermine the suspense that the story deserves, but I can also assure you that actually reading the novel will reward you with far

more than these thoughts on a particular aspect of its significance.

The Fall tells the story of Jean-Baptiste, a Parisian lawyer who has moved to the foggy environs of Amsterdam where he holds forth in "Mexico City," a local bar where he engages patrons in conversation. Before quite realizing what has happened, the reader of this novel finds himself seated in Mexico City, drawn into conversation, and not only listening but also responding to Jean-Baptiste as he tells the story of his life and speaks prophetically into the reader's life. (Yes, Jean-Baptiste does evoke the figure of John the Baptist, and the novel abounds in biblical imagery that will remain unexplored here.)

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Initially, Jean-Baptiste tells the story of a self-absorbed and self-satisfied life of practicing law, enjoying women, and doing what he takes to be good deeds. After drawing us into his life, however, Jean-Baptiste narrates the moment of "the fall." In order not to spoil the plot for those of you who have not taken my advice to read the book before reading this essay, I will not lay out the details of this crucial moment in the narrative. Suffice it to say that a moment of moral timidity and failure catches Jean-Baptiste by

surprise and leaves him shaken to the core. Suddenly everything changes. Confronted with the reality of his moral weakness, Jean-Baptiste finds himself having to learn all over again how to live his life. Shallow self-absorption no longer suffices in the face of the profoundly troubling moral reality that comes to play a defining role in his life.

By framing his novel in the form of a conversation between Jean-Baptiste and the reader, Camus brilliantly draws the reader into Jean-Baptiste's struggle with moral shame. Jean-Baptiste's moral indifference and shallowness through the first half of the novel creates a sense of need in the reader for a deeper moral life, so that when the fall does arrive and the deeper realities of the moral life emerge, the reader is more than ready to say, "Yes, there is moral depth to life, and we often experience it as failure. At least I certainly do." In other words, when Jean-Baptiste falls, Camus has us just where he wants us: face-to-face with the reality of our own moral weakness and failings.

Some of us may be either so naive or so jaded that we do not see ourselves in Jean-Baptiste's story, but most of us recognize his story as our own. We too have known not only mundane failings that we might easily slough off but moments of crisis that unsettle us and make us face our true character. Cornel West, another thoughtful author who struggles with these experiences, borrows from Hegel and describes the person who knows deep moral failure as someone who "has once feared not for this or that moment in his life, but who has feared for all of his nature. So that he has trembled through and through and all that was most fixed in him has become shaken. There are experiences in life," West observes, "that do just this for us." He continues:

When the foundations of the great deep are once thus broken up and

floods have come, it isn't over this or that loss of our green earth that we sorrow. It is because of all that endless waste of tossing waves which now row cubits deep above the top of what were our highest mountains.¹

Though they may disagree on other matters, West, Hegel, and Camus recognize that we all experience moments of profound moral failure that overwhelm us and unsettle us for life, and all three thinkers capture this reality powerfully in their writing.

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The gospel account of Simon Peter's betrayal of Jesus on the last evening of his life also captures the experience of profound moral failure. All four gospels record the fact that at the most critical of times, Simon Peter refused to admit that he even knew who Jesus was, and all four gospels portray this episode as a deeply troubling moment in Peter's life. The evening of his betrayal was for Peter

what the fateful night of failure was for Jean-Baptiste in Camus' novel. It was for both men, the evening of their fall, an evening of profound moral crisis.

Unfortunately, many of us know Simon Peter's story too well for it to strike us any longer with its proper force, but let us try to read it with fresh eyes. Perhaps we will once again be able to see that the gospel narrative does the same work as Camus' story about Jean-Baptiste. Think for a moment of your closest and dearest friend or family member. Think of the person who loves you most dearly – the person who has always been there and always told you she would never let you down. That person was Peter in Jesus' life. Indeed, that very evening Peter had been offended at the mere mention that he might let Jesus down. "Though all others forsake you, I never will," he had said, and he meant it with his whole being. The gospel narrative shows time after time that

Peter was absolutely devoted to Jesus and that Jesus meant everything to him. Peter was completely sincere in asserting that he was ready to die for his best friend and brother.

Within hours of declaring his devotion, however, Simon Peter hovered in the background and simply stood by as his dearest friend was taken away to his death. Having fallen asleep when he was supposed to be keeping watch, Peter already felt the guilt of having given Jesus over to his enemies, and now he followed at a distance. Even so, people recognized him, associated him with Jesus, and said so to his face. Having identified with Jesus so totally earlier in the evening, now Peter refused to have anything to do with him. At the moment when Jesus most needed a friend, Peter refused even to acknowledge him as an acquaintance. With language that embarrasses the writers of the gospels, Peter said that he knew nothing about Jesus and refused to have anything to do with him. Peter didn't simply abandon Jesus, Peter discarded him like a piece of trash and joined Jesus' enemies in heaping shame on the best friend Peter ever had.

My words are inadequate to capture the tragedy of Simon Peter's fall. I can only imagine what it would feel like were I to find myself, by no fault of my own, in some embarrassing or shameful predicament, and finding myself caught in such a moment to have to watch my son or my daughter, my wife or my dearest friend simply walk away and abandon me. Still worse, I agonize to think of my own son or my dearest friend caught in such a place of need, and then to imagine myself abandoning him. I agonize to imagine my daughter or my wife abandoned by everyone else and then to see myself turn – and with the rudest of comments – simply walk away.

As we all know, Peter had no sooner sworn that he did not even know who Jesus was, when

the rooster crowed, and the reality of his betrayal hit Peter with full force. Suddenly, he could not believe what he had done or that he had done it repeatedly and irrevocably. The rudeness of his language and the shame of his betrayal rang in his ears as he stumbled into the darkness sobbing. In Matthew's narrative Peter disappears at this point; his name does not appear again, not even after the resurrection. Peter simply disappears, and his absence from the narrative captures the reality of the darkness into which he walked as the rooster crowed, a darkness made all the darker as Jesus was hung on a cross and laid in a grave, lifeless. No longer would Peter see him. No longer would Peter be able even to apologize. Jesus was gone, and Peter's last words for him were to say that he did not know who Jesus was. Black Sabbath was dark beyond words for Simon Peter.

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when Jesus most
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At this point in his life Peter knew what West and Hegel and Camus also know. There are moments when floods wash cubits deep over what had been the tallest, greenest, safest places of our lives. There are storms, of our own making, that cause us to fear not for this or that moment but for our very nature. There are experiences

that make us tremble through and through so that the most fixed things become shaken. There are experiences that you and I share with Simon Peter and Jean-Baptiste that do this for us, experiences we cannot ignore.

How shall we think about such moments?
How shall we live in them and after them?

In *The Fall* Jean-Baptiste responds by assuming the role of "judge-penitent," in which he judges himself and "confesses" his sin but does so in a way that draws his listeners, and each of Camus' readers, to judge themselves and to confess their sins as well. "No excuses ever, for anyone; that's my principle at the outset. I deny the good intention the respectable mistake, the

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PASSION AND POETRY

Readings for Lent

J. Stephen Addcox

Last October, my home church in Gainesville had a problem. Our slate of classes during the Sunday morning education hour would be ending in November, leaving a gap of three weeks before the Christmas holiday. At the time, I mentioned that I could probably find a few poems that dealt with Christmas and offer a brief class to fill those three weeks; little did I know that those three weeks would become one of my most gratifying teaching experiences. A number of those who attended the class later commented that it had helped them to reconceive the role that literature can play in spiritual reflection. Then, in early January, Richard Horner suggested that we renew the idea as a Lenten poetry reading group at the Christian Study Center.

I solicited the assistance of Rachel McGahey, a graduate student working towards an MFA in poetry at the University of Florida, and William Glass, a graduate of UF's English department, in selecting a series of poems that would best reflect the Lenten season. It was William who suggested that we connect each week of the group to a particular Lenten theme: Prayer, Repentance, Almsgiving, Self-Denial, and the Resurrection. Our poetry selections ranged

from John Donne and George Herbert to T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. William and Rachel were invaluable in their contributions to the group and also helped to lead a few of the sessions.

As with many things in a University town, participation in voluntary activities tends to dwindle as the end of the semester draws nearer. I think that few things demonstrate the success of this reading group more than that it grew larger with each meeting; indeed, our largest group was at the last meeting on Good Friday. The best reading groups often leave participants with two important but conflicting feelings: first that the discussion was genuinely helpful in exploring the meanings of the texts, and second, that the discussion only scratched the surface, leaving a sense that much was left undiscussed. The group's success had everything to do with the enthusiasm of the participants and the fertile soil for conversation that the poems provided. So, as part of our effort to introduce resources that have particular value for meditation and reflection, we are here reprinting several of the poems that formed a part of this reading group.

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"Resurrection, Imperfect"

by John Donne

SLEEP, sleep, old sun, thou canst not have repass'd
As yet, the wound thou took'st on Friday last;
Sleep then, and rest; the world may bear thy stay;
A better sun rose before thee to-day;
Who – not content to enlighten all that dwell
On the earth's face, as thou – enlighten'd hell,
And made the dark fires languish in that vale,
As at thy presence here our fires grow pale;
Whose body, having walk'd on earth, and now
Hasting to heaven, would – that He might allow
Himself unto all stations, and fill all –
For these three days become a mineral.
He was all gold when He lay down, but rose
All tincture, and doth not alone dispose
Leaden and iron wills to good, but is
Of power to make e'en sinful flesh like his.
Had one of those, whose credulous piety
Thought that a soul one might discern and see
Go from a body, at this sepulchre been,
And, issuing from the sheet, this body seen,
He would have justly thought this body a soul,
If not of any man, yet of the whole.

Desunt Caetera

**"Sonnet XIX, On his
blindness"**

by John Milton

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide,
'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'
I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.'
1655

"Easter"
by George Herbert

RISE heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delays,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayst rise:
That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
The crosse taught all wood to resound his name
Who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
Pleasant and long:
Or since all music is but three parts vied,
And multiplied;
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art.

I got me flowers to straw thy way;
I got me boughs off many a tree:
But thou wast up by break of day,
And brought'st thy sweets along with thee.

The Sunne arising in the East,
Though he give light, and th' East perfume;
If they should offer to contest
With thy arising, they presume.

Can there be any day but this,
Though many sunnes to shine endeavour?
We count three hundred, but we misse:
There is but one, and that one ever.
1633

Continued From Page 3

indiscretion, the extenuating circumstance. With me there is no giving of absolution or blessing."² Jean-Baptiste sets himself up at Mexico City "indulging in public confession as often as possible," adapting his words to his listener and leading him "to go me one better." He continues, "I choose the features we have in common, the experiences we have endured together, the failings we share... I construct a portrait which is the image of all and of no one" in which people recognize themselves. It is a portrait of myself, but "the portrait I hold out to my contemporaries becomes a mirror," and I hold it there until they see that "'This is what we are'."³

While Jean-Baptiste brilliantly draws his listeners into a confessional mode, he has nothing to offer them but the truth of their own failings and their inability to escape their condition. "I read the melancholy of the common condition and the despair of not being able to escape it. And as for me, I pity without absolving, I understand without forgiving, and above all, I feel at last that I am being adored!" He admits, "To be sure, my solution is not the ideal," but as "a false prophet crying in the wilderness," my role is only to "hand out definitive testimonials of bad character and habits."⁴

Jean-Baptiste acknowledges that his life-changing experience has not actually changed him. As before, he permits himself everything, but now he has "accepted duplicity instead of being upset about it. On the contrary, I have settled into it and found there the comfort I was looking for throughout life." The essential thing is to permit oneself everything. "I haven't changed my way of life," he concedes. "I continue to love myself and to make use of others. Only the confession of my crimes allows me to begin again lighter in heart and to taste a double enjoyment, first of my nature and secondly of a charming repentance." In the end, he finds his "solution" in yielding to everything: "to women, to pride, to boredom, to resentment, and even to the fever that I feel delightfully rising at this moment."⁵

It is impossible in these few pages to do justice to the struggles and nuances of Camus' exploration of moral experience or to his always unset-

tled and still wandering conclusions. Camus asks the right questions, explores important realities, and is relentless in making us face the reality of moral failings in our own lives. Having made us take such moments seriously, however, he chooses not to see anything deep behind them, and in the name of an absolutely empty freedom he suppresses the tendency to think that seemingly deep experiences point toward still deeper realities. Camus chooses to live in a place of absence and to let that absence have the final word on even our most profoundly moral moments.

But is Camus' understanding of our moral nature compelling? Is Jean-Baptiste himself completely settled in his view?

Strikingly, the one element of Jean-Baptiste's experience that continues to place his thinking in doubt is the sound of laughter. Several times throughout the novel Jean-Baptiste seeks to get free from laughter. Like the doves that occasionally appear in the sky, laughter seems to point beyond itself. It serves as "a rumor of angels."⁶ Jean-Baptiste recognizes that laughter seems to flow from something deeply human and that it points toward something richly transcendent, so when he hears laughter, it unsettles him. When he asserts that he permits himself everything, he tries to do so, he says, "without the laughter this time," but the laughter continues to haunt him. "At long intervals, on a really beautiful night I occasionally hear a distant laugh and again I doubt," he admits. Despite a reality that he cannot deny, however, Jean-Baptiste chooses quickly to "crush everything ... under the weight of [his] own infirmity," close his ears to the laughter, and permit himself everything.⁷

In the gospel narrative it is not laughter but tears that capture our attention.

Like laughter, tears also evoke the deeper dimensions of human experience and point beyond themselves to the transcendent realities that alone give meaning to the profound moral experiences that you and I share with Jean-Baptiste and Simon Peter. It was tears, not laughter, that took Peter to a deeper place for understanding his own weakness and failings, his moral experience, and his humanity. Rather than

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allow his infirmity to crush everything or to blind him to his own his tears, he let his tears reveal the deep significance of his moral actions and point him to the only adequate understanding of his humanity - an understanding rooted in the life and death of his dearest of friends. The incarnation and crucifixion of that friend reveal both the brokenness in us that expresses itself in real moral failures and the image of God in us that gives us moral hope and finds expression in both laughter and in tears.

Perhaps Camus is right. Perhaps there is no depth to the moral experiences that seem to run so deep, but what are the good reasons for thinking so? Doesn't even Camus' own moral sensibility reveal the depth that he resists? Perhaps what makes the best sense of our moral experience is that our moral nature is as deep as it seems to be. Yes, we often express that nature in failure, but rather than allow our infirmity to crush us and send us back to a life of loving ourselves and making use of others, we can allow our infirmity to point us to the love of Christ not only as a cure but as an understand-

ing of our moral nature and of our humanity. Jean-Baptiste judged God to be "out of style" and saw himself to be "an empty prophet for shabby times, [an] Elijah without a messiah,"⁸ but these are not finally questions of "style." Perhaps the Messiah has already come, God is risen, and both our laughter and our tears will lead us to him.

Richard V. Horner is the Executive Director of the Christian Study Center.

Notes

¹Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Common Courage Press, 1993), p. 48.

²Albert Camus, *The Fall* (Vintage International, 1956, 1991), p. 131.

³Camus, pp. 139, 140.

⁴Camus, pp. 143, 147.

⁵Camus, p. 142.

⁶Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Anchor, 1973).

⁷Camus, pp. 141, 142.

⁸Camus, pp. 117, 133.

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INSIDE THIS EDITION

Essay: "A Lenten Meditation on *The Fall*"
by **Richard V. Horner**

*In what ways can literature and art inform our faith and experience of what it means to be human? Richard V. Horner places Albert Camus' novel *The Fall* beside the story of Peter's betrayal of Christ in order to explore how we understand our moral failings.*

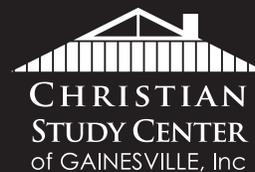
Resource: Passion and Poetry, Readings for Lent
Introduction by **J. Stephen Addcox**

The spring reading group at the Christian Study Center read and discussed a series of poems for the season of Lent. We have reprinted three of these poems as exemplary texts for reading and reflection.

"**Resurrection, Imperfect**" by John Donne
"**Sonnet XIX, On his blindness**" by John Milton
"**Easter**" by George Herbert

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