

The Third Man in the Story

Ronald Aronson Discusses the Sartre-Camus Conflict with Francis Jeanson

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For over fifty years Francis Jeanson been one of the world's exemplary radical thinkers and actors. We Sartreans know him as the author of one of the earliest, and still most insightful, books on Sartre's philosophy, *Le Problème moral et la philosophie de Jean-Paul Sartre* [Available in translation. See *Sartre and the Problem of Morality*, Bloomington, 1980], *Sartre par lui-même*, and *Sartre dans sa vie*, as well as of the review of Camus' *L'Homme révolté* [*The Rebel*, New York, 1954] which instigated the Sartre/Camus break. Then came Algeria. As his biographer writes, "His intervention against the Algerian War shapes our collective destiny. Without Francis Jeanson, the resistance of French intellectuals to this colonial war would have been different" (Marie-Pierre Ulluo, *Francis Jeanson: un intellectuel en dissidence* [Paris: Berg International, 2001], 244). At the beginning of the insurrection he and his first wife wrote a book about French colonialism and its effects on Algeria. He then organized the Jeanson network, the "porteurs des valises" who hid Algerian activists and deserters from the French army, as well as raised money for the FLN. In this role he lived underground for several years, and was tried and sentenced in absentia to 10 years prison, a sentence which was only commuted at the end of the war. Jeanson was invited to Chalon-sur-Saône to direct its House of Culture and then worked as a philosopher participating in a continuing education program for psychiatrists in a mental hospital. He then returned to a small family house in Claouey, on the Bassin d'Arcachon, where he has continued to write and involve himself in such activities as the France-Sarajevo Association, which has encouraged a multi-ethnic Bosnia.

Jeanson's physical and psychological distance from Paris has been mirrored by his freedom from the kind of ambition common to French intellectuals. Although he has acknowledged Sartre's importance in his development, he never seen himself as a disciple and has remained strikingly independent. Yet Jeanson's works have remained virtually unknown to English speakers. Although author of 23 books on such varied subjects as Sartre, the meaning of laughter, Simone de Beauvoir, psychiatry, faith, and Algeria after independence, as well as, most recently a book of interviews with his wife, *Christiane Philip* (Entre-Deux [2000]), the only one of his books to be translated into English is his first one.

During July, 2001, I spent three days in intense discussion with Francis Jeanson. Although he had been ill, he was gracious and energetic. His memory was razor-sharp, and so was his political temper. He not only recalled the earlier arguments, but expanded upon them. He discussed contemporary politics and spoke deeply and eloquently about the issues facing the world today, and his ideas for dealing with them. He obligingly reread the documents of the 1952 debate, and also Camus' *La Chute* [*The Fall*, New York, 1957] and *Le Premier homme* [*The First Man*, Toronto, 1996]. He even read, for the first time, Camus' "La Défense de L'Homme révolté," which Camus wrote in late 1952 but withheld from publication. These conversations with the self-confessed "third man in the story" wound up becoming the most extensive discussion ever of the Sartre-Camus break, as well as an important reassessment of Camus, a reflection on Sartre, a close reading of *La Chute* and "La Défense," and a powerful analysis of the contemporary world. This first part of the interview deals with Sartre and Camus; the next issue will present Jeanson's political reflections.

Ronald Aronson: Please describe the context as well as the immediate circumstances of your article on *L'Homme révolté*.

Francis Jeanson: Yes, these are two different things. The context is broad, the circumstances are very particular. We'll have occasion to come back to the context, no doubt several times. For us, for people like me who were part of *Les Temps modernes*, the context was an anti-Communist France. Very resolutely anti-Communist. And there was a working class which was still, or which still felt itself, represented or in any case more or less supported by the Communist party, and who were therefore bound to feel that the liquidation of Communism, of any sort of Communism, was a stab in the back. Because unfortunately there was Stalinist Communism, but fortu-

nately in France Communism was not essentially Stalinist, or at any rate the French workers didn't experience it that way. So that was the context, and there was also, to look at a more particular detail, the fact that for some time we had all had some worries about what I would call a kind of drift on Camus' part, which seemed to me regrettable. After a little trip through history, Camus was going back into a world where he didn't need history any more. That was the only way he could live in radical opposition to the human condition.

As for the particular circumstances, Camus' book *L'Homme révolté* came out in October 1951 and for the next six months we had meetings, I forget if it was every two weeks, and every time the question came up: "Who's going to review Camus' book?" For a while it was sort of a joke, but it was a serious question, because not to review it at all would have been more provoking than to criticize it. So we had to review it, even critically. Who was going to do it? Nobody volunteered. After a while, at one of these meetings, Sartre said: "We have to settle this, someone has got to do it, so I propose Jeanson do it, because at least he will be polite." Which was probably not a very nice thing to do to me, I don't know what he meant by polite, but still. Since in any case I had some things to say about Camus, and it wouldn't be the first time I criticized him.

Aronson: I have your first article published in the *Revue dominicaine* in Quebec, and you were very critical.

Jeanson: Yes, very critical. Let me tell you a story. In 1948 I went to Algiers with my first wife. We spent six months there, because we had just gotten married, we wanted to get away from Paris at all costs, and I had a job in Lebanon. But then her mother fell seriously ill and I thought, Lebanon is a bit far if we have to come back in a hurry ... So my wife and I compromised and went to Algiers. But we had no money at all, and I had to do odd jobs as they say, my kind of odd jobs anyway. I gave philosophy lessons and radio talks ... Among the odd jobs I did at that time, was a series of 23 articles in an evening paper in Algiers, on Sartre and Camus. On revolt according to Camus. Because I understood very well where Camus was coming from. I felt absurdism was really – I couldn't stand it, it seemed to me absolute nonsense.

Aronson: But why did Sartre think you would be polite?

Jeanson: Ah yes, Sartre. I suppose he felt I was perhaps a bit more bourgeois than he was, I don't know. Something of that sort. In any case we got on well together. Especially from having worked together. But maybe indeed he thought, "He has a veneer of civilization" ...

Aronson: But you had criticized Camus in *Le Problème moral et la pensée de Sartre*.

Jeanson: Yes, and in other places too. Yes, certainly, I did it several times. At the time it was obvious to me. In the same way that I also wrote an article, I forget where but it was quite positive, on *L'Etranger*. I liked *L'Etranger* a lot, because it was a novel.

Aronson: But what bothers me is Sartre's indifference to your previous criticisms of Camus.

Jeanson: Well, maybe he wasn't indifferent. He knew a bit about them. We talked about Camus. He knew what I thought of him. He knew I would be very critical. He just hoped I would be polite. And so I was, as far as I could be, but still ...

Aronson: He said he hoped to keep and protect his friendship. Isn't it true?

Jeanson: No. No, I don't think so. Besides, Simone de Beauvoir said it so often, in many different ways, it was all over, eh? "It was all over between us." And Sartre had trouble getting out of this false friendship. All the more false because in fact, so far as I know, Sartre never had any men friends. So it wasn't a friendship.

Aronson: He told Michel Contat: "Camus was my last good friend."

Jeanson: Yes, the friendship was, so to speak, the last one before he realized that he was incapable of friendships with men. He could have realized it sooner. Because he had never had any male friends that I know of. He had women friends, often close ones. Think of how faithful they were to him right to the end, coming to support him when Simone de Beauvoir dropped him. They brought him some [alcohol] to drink when she didn't have time. He had women friends, yes, he really did. He even had women friends he didn't have sex with. For example, he had a real friendship at the end of his life, with Françoise Sagan.

Aronson: And you also said that Sartre wasn't really your friend.

Jeanson: No, of course not. We weren't friends, or else I don't know what friendship is. We weren't friends, we worked together. He trusted me. But no, that's not what I call friendship. I don't have many men friends myself, but still, I have some idea what it is, and it didn't exist between Sartre and me. He was very nice. I asked him to be the best man at my first wedding and he agreed without hesitation. But no, it wasn't friendship.

Aronson: Was it hard to write your review of *L'Homme révolté*?

Jeanson: No, not at all. The only difficulty was that I started it in Paris, and then I took a month's holiday in Brittany, and that complicated things. During the day I would write two or three pages, and in the evening I would go to the Paris train and just ask any passenger if he would be so kind as to hand them in at a particular bar across from Montparnasse station when he got to Paris. They always got there. And the lad at the printer's, Chantonnet, had no objection to stopping at the bar in question to pick them up.

Aronson: Have you reread it lately?

Jeanson: You know, you played a dirty trick on me: because you were coming, I reread a few pages, not all of it. I also recently, but less recently, reread the other one, the subsequent article, "Pour tout vous dire" ["To tell you the whole truth"]. Well, what do you *think* I think of it? I'm not sorry for anything I said about Camus' thought at that time. I repeat, at that time. Given that situation. I also feel my reasoning was quite sound. I regret nothing. I regret nothing. Well yes, I regret having written the second article, because "Pour tout vous dire" was unnecessary and added nothing. Even though I came up with more profound arguments than in the first article. It doesn't matter. Mainly I found out afterwards that Camus had been very deeply hurt by it and so I felt that it really hadn't been worth while saying any more. I'd have been better off keeping quiet. But I don't have to blame myself for saying things I didn't believe.

Aronson: Even if you were sometimes ironic in the first article?

Jeanson: Yes, normally one shouldn't be allowed to use irony, but I must say there was something that bothered me enormously in

Camus, and that was his noble and haughty tone. Above it all. And in some places I needed to deflate that a bit, I couldn't help myself. I think I must also have said one or two things, but just a few words, which were very harsh, and Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir asked me nicely if I could cut out those two passages. Two very short passages, I forget what they said.

Aronson: And did you?

Jeanson: Sure I did! Because they did seem to me redundant in relation to what I said in the article as a whole. They were right to say to me: "You don't need to insist," in the same way as they maybe could have said about the second article. I might have understood then, but for the moment I must say that Camus' reaction had been so strong that -

Aronson: In your conversations with your wife [*Entre-Deux*] you talk about Camus' arrogance, and you say Camus tried to be above politics. You say nothing about his anti-Communism. Why not?

Jeanson: Because I couldn't tell what sort of anti-Communism it was. In fact he wasn't anti-Communist, he was something else. He was anti-history. He was against history. He was in favour of a metaphysical rebellion against the human condition. As he had always rebelled against God, while saying He didn't exist. He didn't exist but He was unfair! Yes, a metaphysical rebellion.

Aronson: Yes, you're right, but when I reread his early essay on rebellion – it's a little essay dating from 1943, the first draft of *L'Homme révolté* – it sounds like Sartre's thought. You remember: "I rebel therefore we are." And it seems to me that Camus was somewhat parroting the Sartre of the first pages of *L'Être et le néant*, as if he had begun to read it and the book influenced him a bit. And then I think he started writing about rebellion, in a very Sartrean style. Then afterwards, when he tried to polish it, it became more Camusian and less Sartrean.

Jeanson: Yes, it's possible, I can't judge because I've never read it, but there's one thing you also have to consider, and that is that in 1943 Camus had dipped his toes into history a bit. And he started writing *L'Homme révolté*, in part to get out of it. So there was a moment when his rebellion may have been quite close to our own

thought, but he was very quickly disappointed by reality, and at that moment he chose metaphysical rebellion instead.

Aronson: Yes, but even if you're right, there are two currents in Camus in the 40s, the effort get away from history, and the constant return to history. He never managed to avoid history, right until his last breath, because of the Algerian war.

Jeanson: Yes, but he always managed not to be seen in history. Not to be seen and not to take up historical positions. And he tried to fix things, he tried to speak to both sides. But he never at any time became aware of the political dimension of the question. Basically he saw things from a moral point of view. He said to both sides: "That's bad, you're crazy, there's no sense to it, you're going to kill each other for nothing." But "for nothing" means nothing, it was for them to say if it was about nothing. And there, as I say, he wasn't in history. He was avoiding history....

Aronson: Let's talk about the roots of this attitude in Camus. I think it's the colonizer who keeps history at a distance.

Jeanson: Of course, he doesn't want you talking about history. He doesn't want to risk his status being called in question. But you know, that's exactly the same thing that's happening now, since November 2000, when the new stories about torture in Algeria were published.... I wrote a whole lot about it, so that people would finally admit half-heartedly that not only the torture was wrong, the colonial war was wrong too. But that was the same thing. The *pièdes-noirs* didn't want any discussion of their status as colonials.

Aronson: You've read Albert Memmi's book *Le Colonisateur et le colonisé*, published in 1957? He talks about the colonizer of goodwill, and I think a lot of people thought he was talking about Camus.. And then in the same month that Camus was receiving the Nobel Prize, Memmi published a little article in *La Nef* on "Albert Camus the Colonizer of Goodwill." It's a little letter in which he identifies the analyses in his book with Camus the man. And he shows great sympathy with the fact that Camus is in an impossible situation as a colonizer....

Can we go back to Camus' and Sartre's replies? Did you read them both together, or did you read Sartre's article before you wrote yours?

Jeanson: No, no. No, Sartre and I read Camus' letter together. I had handed in my article and it had been published. Afterwards Camus' letter came, addressed to *Monsieur le Directeur* of *Les Temps modernes*. I read that letter at the same time as Sartre did. And then he wrote his reply and I wrote another one. But when I wrote my first criticism, I had no idea how Camus would react, I never imagined that he would act that way. Nor did Sartre.

Aronson: When did you read Sartre's letter?

Jeanson: Sartre's letter, his answer? When it was being put in the review. Because we worked together.

Aronson: After you'd written your second article, then?

Jeanson: Absolutely, I didn't draw on Sartre's reply to write my second article. That wasn't how I did things. I would really have been paralyzed if I had known what Sartre was going to say....

Aronson: In the article there is an passage talking about your fantasy, directed against Camus.

Jeanson: What I couldn't stand was to see his lyricism reappear at the end of a book about rebellion. A book which in my opinion was about something completely different. He seemed to me to be introducing another red herring. The great harmony of nature crops up again. As a whole it seems very fine, you can't find fault with it, but as soon as he gets into details he has to make his mind up, he has to prefer one thing to the other. He has to live in the relative. – But you mentioned Sartre in this connection. Why?

Aronson: Because in my opinion Sartre's reply was incredible. It was lively, it was personal, it was comical. It's as if Sartre was singing in several different keys at once. It's an attack. And he had the talent to direct all these resources in all directions at the same time. He even uses his sensitivity, his feelings, his affection for Camus in the years after the war. I've never read anything like it. And your reply is completely different because you continue the argument in a colder tone, but you go on talking to Camus in hopes of getting a reply.

Jeanson: Yes, that's part of it, it's true, that's part of it. It wasn't so true in the second article. But you also have to remember ... That

his and Sartre's mutual affection, maybe I'm being too harsh, was that of a pair of drunks. They went on a spree from time to time. It was a sophisticated high-class spree, with Picasso and others, but still they would go out in the evening and raise a ruckus. Drank, painted the town red, and basically they never saw each other in the daytime, just on those evenings. So that was their affection. And certainly it's true that Camus was charming. I didn't know him myself, but he must have been charming....

Aronson: What do you think of *L'Homme révolté* today?

Jeanson: What I think of it today, doesn't mean that today I think I shouldn't have written [my criticism]. No, it doesn't mean that. I think that today the problem wouldn't have been put in the same terms, that's all. Because things have changed a lot. We're not in the same situation now. To begin with nobody knows what Communism is any more. Which is a pity really, there were perhaps things worth keeping that were deeper than what we did with it. And secondly because we no longer have that wonderful and absurd resource, a designated adversary. That's all gone now. Globalization isn't an adversary. You don't know how to get a handle on it, you're wrapped up inside it.

Aronson: What did you think of Camus' behavior?

Jeanson: I don't know, I'm not going to try and think myself back to that time. You're always wrong if you try that. But I was certainly extremely surprised by his writing to "*Monsieur le Directeur*." Not annoyed. On the contrary, I think it was the reaction of someone who couldn't imagine that he could be criticized. Couldn't imagine it, or at least not by us, by *Les Temps Modernes*. Because there was his "friendship" with Sartre. He couldn't imagine it. And there he was wrong. He never wanted to realize what separated him from Sartre and had done for years, on various points. So he reacted in that way and I didn't give a damn, I mean it was Sartre who was shocked the most.

Aronson: But weren't you annoyed at being ignored by Camus?

Jeanson: No! To start with I'd never met Camus. I didn't know him. I thought it was perfectly normal that he said nothing about me. How old was I then? It was in 1952, I was 30, I was a beginner, I

wrote *Le Problème moral et la pensée de Sartre* when I was 25, I was now 30. It was normal. After all, Camus was a person of considerable importance – he was no sort of victim.

Aronson: Did you hear tell that he wrote your name and then crossed it out?

Jeanson: I had read this, I forget where, but in any case I didn't care. Not a bit. He wrote it, and crossed it out, that was part of his strategy of the moment.... He fought, he defended himself as well as he could, he counter-attacked, as everyone does in such cases. I found out afterwards that we happened to have a whole lot of information about how he had written the book, and how long it had taken him. I found out this book was his own flesh and blood. I didn't realize it. All the less so because the general style of *L'Homme révolté* wasn't especially ... My wife tried to reread it recently, but she couldn't. She gave up after twenty pages. "It's boring," she said.

Aronson: You praised the style, but it's not really well-written.

Jeanson: Oh yes, the style! I understand what you're saying. I think we cheated a bit. Sartre too. We had so much to say against the content that we preferred to praise the form. But there are passages where it must be obvious that we didn't think much of the form either.... It seemed to us a bit too much. It's true that we had to say something.

Aronson: So we have talked about the book, and your review of it. What did you think of Sartre's "Réponse à Albert Camus"?

Jeanson: I think it was extraordinarily brilliant. Extraordinarily brilliant. A complete success. It was almost embarrassing. Because it isn't possible to have an adversary like that. It isn't possible. Camus had a very exalted idea of himself and his success, and he wasn't about to be intimidated. But he should have known that you didn't just attack Sartre like that and get away with it. After all it was up to him, it was his idea. And Sartre attacked him with extraordinary brio. But there were also some spiteful remarks in Camus' letter too, which were a bit uncalled-for. For example, when he talked about the seat turned in the direction of history.

Aronson: It's a very specific reference!

Jeanson: Yes, I could see that. Yes, it's very nice but after all, since nobody knew the story behind it, it appeared to mean that the person being spoken to already knew the direction in which history was going and had jumped on the bandwagon.

Aronson: But in fact Camus was saying to Sartre: "I know what you did when Paris was being liberated, I know you went to guard the Comédie Française and fell asleep in your seat." But not in so many words.

Jeanson: Not in so many words, but it's specifically suggested.

Aronson: Yes, suggested, because it was when they were friends that Camus woke Sartre, supposedly on guard but sleeping at the Comédie Française, and said: "At least your seat is turned in the direction of history." He said it as a friend.

Jeanson: Yes, but what it becomes in his letter is quite different....

Aronson: I'm wondering what Jeanson thought of his own reply after reading Sartre's.

Jeanson: Let me think how things happened. Our two replies were published at the same time, in the same issue. So I hardly had time to see it, and besides I was in Brittany, I finished my piece at top speed, as best I could, and so I saw Sartre's reply when I came back from vacation, at the printer's. That's how it was. It didn't get in my way because I didn't see it. I knew about his fury, on the first day. But that's all, so I must have read his piece at the last moment, when I checked the final proof.

Aronson: You're unlucky, you know.

Jeanson: Why?

Aronson: Because your reply has almost been forgotten.

Jeanson: Ah, the second one!

Aronson: Yes, the second one.

Jeanson: Yes, but it doesn't matter. In any case what interests me is, what can we do today?

Aronson: Wasn't it important then?

Jeanson: No. I mean that was a big enough affair as it was. All the papers were talking about it, that was enough, I didn't need to be talked about twice when I was only in a supporting role, the third man in the story. I knew how to talk maybe, but that was all, I wasn't on the same level as the two combatants. Nowhere near. And I have to think that I let myself reply twice and nobody was interested. What I said was interesting for me, because I had gone to some trouble to clarify my ideas on some points, but as for the public (*he claps his hands*), you should have seen the way the dispute was reported everywhere, I can assure you that one piece more or less from me wasn't going to change anything. The press's reaction was scary.... It was typical of the Paris spirit. The papers talk about what is likely to arouse emotion, passion. Sartre-Camus: people had been expecting something to happen on this front for some time. That's how people are, and even twenty or thirty years later, or more, there were people saying what a pity we don't get stuff like that any more. (*Laughter*).

Aronson: What was the political issue for you in 1952?

Jeanson: What was the issue for us in 1952? That's the real problem for me. If we wanted to talk about the past, we have to talk about the context. The difficulty we had to radically distinguish Communism from Stalinism, the French working class from the Soviet system, the concrete struggle from totalitarian ideology. No doubt we should have made the distinction clearer during the polemic, because on many occasions it was clear to us. We could distinguish perfectly well our idea of Communism, what was valid in Communism, and even French Communism as it was, from Stalinism. We understood perfectly well. We'd already written a lot about that.

Aronson: Camus accused you of being in league with Stalinism, because of your political realism.

Jeanson: I was never in league with Stalinism. I was in league with Communism as a way of seeing the world. And there was a French Communist party, which at the time still won 25% of the votes at

elections. That was the extent of my complicity, and it was absolutely not with Stalinism. I told you that long before, I wrote an article in *Esprit* on the Stalinist definition of the proletariat, which was crazy.

Aronson: Is this the one? (*Holds it up for him to see*).

Jeanson: Yes, it was in 1948 or at the latest in 1950, anyway between 1948 and 1950.

Aronson: This leads to a key question about your relationship with Sartre. I think that in *Le problème moral et la pensée de Sartre* you anticipated Sartre's thought, as he says, and you became a Marxist before Sartre did. Sartre found it harder to give up his own thought and move towards thinking about society. You did so before Sartre did.

Jeanson: Yes, but less strongly than he did.

Aronson: In 1951 Sartre was becoming a revolutionary. It was very hard for him, but I think you did it before he did, and that's why he had problems writing the criticism of Camus. For you I think it was a natural thing to do. I think that for Sartre your attack on Camus, if I can call it that, and Camus' reply, nudged him towards Communism -in his words, towards reality.

Jeanson: Yes, possibly. There must be something of that in it, yes. No doubt. But he didn't hesitate after that, he wasted no time ...

Aronson: So there was a sort of logic in choosing Jeanson to write the review, wasn't there?

Jeanson: You know, for a long time there was a logic of that kind at *Les Temps modernes*. Even later on, when there was an editorial committee, after the Algerian war, I was on the committee, we met very regularly, and one day, I don't know how, the discussion turned to *Critique de la raison dialectique*. I forget the details, but somebody from outside had attacked the book, and there were friends among us, members of the committee, who said: "It's frightening what Sartre is saying." Sartre said, "My deep feeling is that apart from Jeanson and me, nobody here has even read the book." And certainly he was convinced that there was a bit too much Parisian spirit in the way we were approaching the problem, we were being too

casual, too dilettantish. That's what made me say at one time that I wanted to leave Paris as soon as possible, because I was fed up with listening to high-class gossip....

Aronson: What do you think today about the Sartre-Jeanson-Camus quarrel? Now that Communism has fallen do you have any regrets?

Jeanson: No, because we are no longer in the same situation. I haven't regretted it. When people say to me: "Algeria is turning into a mess, don't you regret having helped the Algerians?" No, not at all. At that time they needed to gain their independence. And afterwards they did what they could with it. So no, no regrets.

Aronson. How did you come to write *Le problème moral et la pensée de Sartre*?

Jeanson: When I wrote that book, it was by sheer chance that I met the director of the Éditions du Seuil, and he gave me three months to write it, and I hadn't read *L'Être et le néant* when I started. I had read several of Sartre's previous works, but I told myself: No problem, *L'Être et le néant* won't upset things, this is bound to work. I wrote the first chapter, the first part, there were three parts, and began reading *L'Être et le néant* at the same time. And I talked about *L'Être et le néant* in the second part.

Aronson: You are always talking in your own voice. You use Sartre, but it's Jeanson who speaks.

Jeanson: Yes, that's what I've been told about my *Sartre dans sa vie*: It's Jeanson who people see, it's Jeanson confessing himself. And yet I had every intention of talking about Sartre. There happens to be a sort of similarity which meant that I could indeed ask myself the question that was being asked. And later, when we did one of the two issues of *Les Temps Modernes* to mark Sartre's death, I was asked to write an article on Sartre's moral philosophy. He didn't write one, but at the same time it is for me the obvious main thread of his whole trajectory. And I defended Sartre against Simone de Beauvoir and others who accused Benny Lévy of having made him sound mentally decrepit and gotten him off track. He didn't get off track in the slightest in the last interviews he gave me for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, he came back to the essential theme of what he had always said.

And he was accused of having been manipulated by Benny Lévy, but at least two people assured me that it wasn't so, the day I got a phone call about it. One of them was Jean Daniel and the other was Henri Guillemin. Daniel was a professor at Bordeaux, who wrote a lot of rather religious books, very free-thinking but deeply marked by Christianity, and Guillemin was an extremely brilliant narrator, a wonderful lecturer. Guillemin was in Jean Daniel's office when Sartre said, "Yes, I want it, I want that published." Those were his last days. It's a marvelous story. . . That's also why I say you can't trust your friends. There are people who plotted to try to stop publication of what he had said in those last three interviews, and that's not nice, it's really not nice. It proves how completely they had misunderstood the mainspring, the essential idea in his thought.

Aronson: Back to the Sartre/Camus quarrel. In my opinion Sartre chose you to provoke the break so that he could go on evolving.

Jeanson: I see what you mean. Your hypothesis makes sense, it holds water.

Aronson: But Sartre would say no, because I'm talking about an unconscious intention, aren't I?

Jeanson: Would he say no? I think he'd be just as likely to say yes. Because he didn't spend his time camouflaging himself. He didn't spend his time hiding things or favoring his bad faith.

After the articles appeared in *Les Temps modernes*, several people got in touch with me, friends of Camus, close friends of his, and said: "Listen, this is absurd, would you agree to meet Camus?" I said yes, I swear to you that I said yes, absolutely. And then they came back and said: "We could have saved our breath." I read recently that he said to someone: "Meet that bastard? Never!" I didn't think of him as a bastard, but he thought I was one. He was categorical, he wouldn't do it. I'm not guessing this, I was told it. We had the same doctor, a pretty special doctor, [Jacques] Ménétrier, a very fine fellow, whom I liked a lot, who saved my lungs once, with the very special way he had of treating tuberculosis, and it really worked. I liked Ménétrier a lot, and Camus was a patient of his. And one day he said to Camus that this was absurd, he knew both of us, and for him it was obvious that we could meet, at his house, and "Never, absolutely not, that

bastard, never!" Well, I didn't make a fuss, but Camus was certainly bitter. He couldn't even think rationally any more.

Aronson: Didn't he seem besieged after becoming anti-Communist?

Jeanson: But I think for some time he'd besieged himself. He'd wrapped himself around a sort of certainty, security, derived from his refusal of history, and he was happy because now he was writing the theory of that position, he was writing *L'Homme révolté*, he was very happy with that book, he thought it would be something very important.... And above all he was careful all the time not to get to the heart of the matter. Not to get down to concrete reality. You know, it's odd to see someone go on and on like that about Stalinism, and Communism in quotation marks, and there's nothing about the condition of the workers, nothing.

Aronson: Nor about the reality of present-day revolutions.

Jeanson: Exactly, and nothing about Madagascar. So what's his game? He was trying to shape something that would be guilty enough to allow him to lump everything together.... What Camus did, I call contortions. Contortions to wake us up. Now one thing, now another, he didn't care if it made sense or not. And it was like that all the way through, he did anything and everything, always with the idea "Listen, we mustn't fall asleep, we right to rebel." And so we are. But the rebellion Camus was thinking of was completely different, it was completely abstract, metaphysical. The fact that he himself calls it metaphysical is –

Aronson: Like *L'Être et le néant*, *L'Homme révolté* is a whole structure, a fundamental structure of thought ... as well as social thought –

Jeanson: Camus never thought about society. Never. Never. He would have had to be more concrete to define the problems of society. That's exactly what's missing, it's the history of a ghost society.

Aronson: True, society doesn't exist in this book. He's concerned with the individual rebelling against death, against God –

Jeanson: Against the human condition.

Aronson: But even so, Camus remains appealing.

Jeanson: Ah well, that's another matter. Yes, by all means. I'm sorry I never knew him, because I think in certain ways I'd have found him charming. But his thought never charmed me, no, I can't say it did.

Aronson: His thought as distinct from his politics?

Jeanson: No, it's the same thing. A non-political thought, a thought that takes refuge in a sort of moral philosophy, its content being a totalitarian morality.

Aronson: Let's talk about "La Défense de *L'Homme révolté*" [Undated text, in Camus: *Essais*, 1965, p.1702-1716] -

Jeanson: Yes, I read it.

Aronson: What do you think of it?

Jeanson: It didn't tell me much. He just takes up the ideas of *L'Homme révolté*, though he does modify them a bit, taking into account what he was criticized for. And he goes straight back to the same idealism, it's absolutely amazing. And he says it himself, it's very odd, he talks about his own nihilism. For example – if you have the text with you – I see on p.1705, at the beginning, third line: "Since our whole political society, by its cowardices or its cruelties, was devoted to murder, and indeed served it spectacularly on the European scene, ..." But what period is he talking about here? The Second World War. He is, I'm not mistaken. And it's a bit much, when it's you against Nazism, to dismiss both sides equally and say "our whole political society, by its cowardices or its cruelties, was devoted to murder." It's too easy, it's too easy. You just throw it all away and go on to other things. You're above it all. I don't know, it's really -

Aronson: Even the massacres at Sétif [in Algeria in 1945]?

Jeanson: Yes, of course. Of course, it's the same thing. But all the same, that was at the time of the struggle against Nazism. And on page 1706 there's another incredible generalization, at about the tenth line, after *L'Homme révolté*: "This is, with different faces on it, one and the same nihilism which we are all responsible for, and

which we can only escape from by accepting it with all its contradictions." What a wonderful idea. Accept the whole thing, there's only one nihilism, it's true, you accept it with all its contradictions. You don't go into details, they're unimportant. You accept all of it. And hey presto, we're all in the same mess. That's wonderful.

After that it gets better. He tries to define more clearly than in *L'Homme révolté* the relationship he glimpses between rebellion and revolution. I must say there are some good passages there, a bit better than what he said in *L'Homme révolté*. When he talks on page 1709, at about the tenth line, of a fertile tension between rebellion and revolution, that's very good. And the lines following: "I concluded ... that in order to refuse organized terror and the police state, revolution needs to keep intact the principle of rebellion which gave birth to it, just as rebellion needs a revolution to continue it, to give it a body and a truth. Each, in the final analysis, is the limit of the other."

But now he goes off the track. He says "In any case this is what I meant when I spoke of limits and moderation." Now those terms are worrying, because in a footnote he says: "This statement seems to me remarkably faithful to dialectical reasoning, which everyone nowadays is loudly demanding." I'm sorry, but what he has just said is the opposite of a dialectical statement, the exact opposite. This idea that you can mix in the right proportions two values which balance each other, or don't, a bit more of the one and a bit less of the other, that's not dialectics. Dialectics deals with two things which are not of the same order, not homogeneous, which cannot be measured with the same yardstick. No, that remark really infuriates me. When he talks about dialectics he really shows crass ignorance. I mean, why does he use words like that if he doesn't understand them?

Aronson: Because he wants to show that he remains faithful to leftist ideas.

Jeanson: He needs to make a better effort than that. Because that's not being faithful, that's plain straightforward betrayal. What's all this about limits, proportions, add a bit more rebellion, add a bit more revolution, a bit more – Things don't happen that way in real life. People aren't always able to relax and say, let's try a bit more of this or a bit less – I mean it just isn't true! He's just denying real, concrete struggles. Yes, obviously you have to mistrust an uncontrolled rebellion, which gains in fury what it loses in clearheadedness, that's true. There is a point beyond which you achieve the opposite of what you

wanted. But in real life there's no line telling you where to stop. At times one of the contending forces defeats the other, but each of them is inhabited by the other, haunted by the other. And if you don't take that into account, you don't have a dialectic.

I was a bit surprised by his choice of terms there, but [here's something worse] on page 1710, about the eighth line: "What is comfortable is the drunkenness of body and soul, the mind's consent to a simplification by the worst, in other words, irresponsibility." He's talking about irresponsibility? He's the one who wants to be completely irresponsible, he wants to be somewhere else. By globalizing everything else, "I felt I could write the word moderation." The beginning of the paragraph. Yes, "rebellion is the moderator of revolution and vice versa." In a way, seen from a distance, that's true, you can argue that, very well. "For a mind fighting reality" – that's wonderful, he's asking us to fight reality – "the only rule is to stand at the point where opposites confront each other." But that's an imaginary point, there is no point where opposites confront each other, what's he talking about? And we must stand there. Why? Because at that moment you're neither on one side nor the other. Now that's wonderful. Opposites confront each other and you stand there and watch it happen, and you're the best possible observer, just at the spot – But there are no such spots. The confrontation happens everywhere at once. And then "What I call lack of moderation is the movement of the soul which blindly crosses the frontier on which the opposites are in balance." Have you ever seen such a thing, a spot where opposites are in balance? That's where he wants to stand. But it isn't anywhere. Or else it varies with circumstances, Wednesday it's here, Saturday it's somewhere else. It doesn't mean anything, "the place where opposites are in balance."

What else? Oh yes, here's another bit. He manages to complicate things when he tries to be more precise. The beginning of the paragraph [1711]. "The analysis of these contradictions culminates in any case in the much more general tension I have tried to define, which opposes the individual to history." What's he talking about? It's a fairy story. The individual versus history. If they were opposed there wouldn't be any history. That's meaningless. He opposes the individual to history, when today we have the problem of a completely individualistic world, a completely individualistic society, that lets history do what it likes, they don't understand a thing about it, it carries them along and they have no idea what's going on. Things are completely different from what he believes. And the individual, how fine, how noble. The individual standing there facing history.

It's never happened. "Without this constant struggle, this 'courage every morning' that Alain spoke of, without this double vigilance, neither history nor man could progress." It's crazy! This constant struggle, this courage everyday, who's showing it? People who are hungry and have nothing to eat? The oppressed? Then they'll have to be very careful, and not go beyond the stage of rebellion, which is – No, come on. Who is he to say things like that, who is he? It doesn't help the defence of *L'Homme révolté*, it really doesn't.

And yet he expresses himself better sometimes, on certain points. Where is it? Ah yes, here we are [1712]. He's talking about the individual, and of course about individualism. And "historicism." Yes, here we are. His great enemy is history. Which means that anything on history's side is nihilism. Historicism is nihilism. "Pure individualism justifies everything done in loneliness and despair." All right, but what is pure individualism? I don't know, it's somewhere off in that direction. "But historicism justifies all baseness in consideration of a future of greatness." I can see what he condemns in historicism, it's the way it persuades people to accept what is going on now, in the name of a glorious future: the "Singing Tomorrows [proclaimed by Communist poet Gabriel Péri]," etc. All right, but what does that have to do with us? I mean, we never practiced historicism....

Aronson: He's talking about Communism, isn't he?

Jeanson: Yes, but who's he talking to? To the Communists? No, I think he's talking to us. I find that sad. It's sad because he's attacking stuff that doesn't concern us. In fact long before that, I think it was in 1948 or thereabouts, I wrote an article in *L'Esprit* called "Définition du prolétariat?" with a question mark, in which I said that I felt all the orthodox and official definitions missed the point.... Since then it's become clear that it's impossible to keep the official orthodox definition of the proletariat. It has taken a different shape. The proletariat today means societies fighting against globalization.

What's the next point? Ah yes. This is typical Camus. About the twelfth line [1713]. "The individual only acquires and increases his meaning by advancing towards his limit." Nonsense. The individual never acquires his meaning, and he never increases it. He has no meaning a priori. There is no meaning of the individual. The individual creates meaning. He produces meaning, but he can only be sure of it by sharing it with other people. By comparing it with the meaning that other people give. "Only acquires and increases his meaning"! Where are we? In a world already completed?

And then on page 1714 there's another wonderful bit. This nihilist is strangely optimistic sometimes. "Rebirth is no doubt not going to happen tomorrow, but nihilism already belongs to the past." How wonderful! I would have thought we were moving towards nihilism faster than ever. Now in this end and beginning of a century, anyway, that's my feeling. I don't know how to argue as he does. No doubt if he had to deal with the world the way it is now, he would totalize it in the same way and say it's not good, but if the individual stands up and fights history, there is a chance things will be better. But this bit about the individual is a myth. There is no immediate individual. There are individuals, but today, alas, they can't manage to form a society, that's the problem. The individual on his own is nothing.

And, ah yes. "The first task" – I didn't mark this passage [1715], you did – "the first task of our public life is to preserve the fragile chance of peace, and to this end not to serve any of the forces who are waging war, in any way whatever." Hear, hear. We sit down and we just watch. We sit down somewhere nice and comfortable and watch what happens. And you don't support either side because, as Mitterrand said, we mustn't add war to war. Now, come on. When you see what's going on, how a whole population is being treated, you say no, I can't put up with that. I don't know if I'm adding war to war, but anyway I say I can't accept that. And I can't be content to say it so as to feel good. In some way I have to take a position.

Aronson: As he did during the Nazi occupation.

Jeanson: As he did on occasion. And then he was disappointed. I think he was disappointed by what happened immediately after the war, and he withdrew from public life. Or in a sense he was cut off, as you were saying. Because he was a pied-noir he was cut off as if by the law. But then the [Algerian] war brought him into contact with reality for a while, in some form or another, and he kind of became committed. Only then he quickly became uncommitted, because this commitment didn't suit him, it was too much. It was too complicated.

Aronson: He continued to be against revolutionary violence.

Jeanson: Yes, that's true.

Aronson: But he continued to close his eyes to the violence of the bourgeois and colonial state, except for the violence of the death penalty. He never speaks of everyday violence, like colonial violence.

Jeanson: So much so that I think if he were alive today, he wouldn't see the violence being done in the form of a false economy. I think he wouldn't see it, or else he would realize it exists but just say yes, that's evil.

Aronson: Wouldn't he be against capitalism, against the market economy?

Jeanson: How would he be against it? Think about it, if he were against the market, he would have to be for other people who are also against the market. Or else he would be all alone, which is a noble position but untenable and ineffective, you can derive pleasure from it but that's all. So either you commit yourself, or you admit you're not there. But you can't just pretend to be there. You must think I'm being ferocious, eh?

Aronson: No, not at all.

Jeanson: What strikes me is that sometimes I have the impression he's about to say something I could very well agree with, that I could feel too. For example, I've often said that what we can do for now is keep our head above water, so that the next generation has a chance to do better than us. We have to keep our head above water, in other words resist, resist, resist. We're not sure we can build anything, but in any case we can resist and save the possibility of carrying on. And that isn't what he meant. At one point I thought, hey, maybe he's going to get it right, but no luck. "That day our efforts will bear fruit if we have succeeded in remaining at the limit" [1715]. There's this mythology of the limit again!

This is a nice bit. "Every adversary, however repugnant, is one of our inner voices which we would be tempted to silence, but which we must listen to in order to correct, adapt or reaffirm the few truths which we glimpse in the same way; what is expressed in our own words, the others did not wish to hear. Then everything is mingled and the aggression which sets one against the other is merely the wicked detestation that each of us feels for a part of himself." That's true, and it's also close to what I was saying earlier about dialectics and how each term contains the other one. It's true, that's how it is

in dialogues, obviously. But how far is it so? Not enough to let us dream of a consensus which would form almost in spite of ourselves. It's a struggle in dialogue form. Afterwards, to be sure, it's wonderful. You have to go all the way in a direction which doesn't exist. Because in that way art will be saved. "Something is then forged which is our common awareness"- that wouldn't be bad, in fact it would be nice to have a common awareness – "on which the works of each of us will be built in the future, on which works each of us will be judged. Nothing is useless." Whatever that last line means.

In short, ["La Défence"] hasn't reconciled me with *L'Homme révolté*.... In fact, I find it extraordinary that in trying to make himself clear, he succeeds a bit too well. He increases the difficulties he created for himself in *L'Homme révolté*. His position is untenable, and I think it shows even more clearly than it did in the book. It amazed me because it's so clear. He doesn't even realize that he's getting deeper into the mire. Or perhaps he does realize, perhaps indeed he's thinking that I'm right. Anyway, I read it with interest. I kept hoping that it would lead me to revise my position. To be honest, that isn't what interests me. What interests me is, what can it teach us today? But we can talk about that when you like. It's true that I keep on thinking about ["La Défence"] because I find it striking, but in a way it doesn't matter, because the real question is, what do we make of Camus today? ...

Aronson: *L'Homme révolté* is still an important book today, as you know.

Jeanson: So is Saint-Exupéry!...

Aronson: Camus expresses an attitude which you find among young people. He expresses reasons why some of them have become committed to politics. It's rebellion against existence. Among people on the Left who have become politicized, some of them did it for reasons which are like what Camus said. And the quality of their commitment, of their individualism, like that of their anti-Communism in former times, is what I think Camus expresses, against the great ideological dreams and struggles. He talks about limits, as you just said, and Camus is a sort of precursor of postmodern politics, in the sense that he proposes avoiding the great theories of history and the great projects of revolution.

Jeanson: But we're all in that situation! I mean, we avoid telling ourselves fairy stories about the end of history. But that doesn't mean that we engage in politics the way Camus does, in other words – I interrupted you, I'm sorry – in my opinion what he proposes in his writings is a moral commitment. And in doing so he liquidates politics. He liquidates political commitment, the whole domain of politics. And that's serious. Because if there is no political commitment without a moral imperative, in my opinion a moral imperative is not enough on its own. Because there also have to be conditions to exercise that kind of imperative. So the two are connected, it's not a question of adding them together, and in any case to separate them is stupid. To separate them so completely, in fact, as to ignore one of them.

Because what you call postmodern politics is the choice of a consensus as far as possible, and as far as possible you want to avoid conflict, and so you agree, on what? On nothing. On nothing, because you're not undertaking anything together. I think he satisfies people because we have all suffered too much from politics with no moral imperative. "Hey," people say, "look at this." And not only young people. There are adults of almost all ages, I would say, who are presently reading Camus and are delighted with him. Because he's restful, he's reassuring, because you don't have to tell yourself there's an effort to be made, a real commitment on the real scene. So reading Camus is more restful. But I think his present success is rather worrying given the shape of his thought.

But what I should not say, I did just now but I shouldn't, is that I'm sure of what he would say if he were alive today. I can't know that. Obviously I'm not sure, I have no idea. But all that I know about his thought leads me to imagine that he'd have tried – maybe not succeeded, but tried – to keep the real problem at arm's length by still positing a totality which one could only be opposed to, but not aggressively opposed to because in any case it would be quite satisfying for everyone's conscience. There would be no reason to be aggressive, we'd be happy because we were against it, but actually we would be against nothing, everything and therefore nothing. I think that's what appeals to a lot of people. As for the younger generation, I think there is a second reason why they may be charmed by Camus: Camus is above all a writer, and they can feel that. God knows it's useful for young people to feel writing has some use. But the big problem is that they know nothing about the context of the time [when Camus wrote] and haven't yet really grasped today's context either. So there you are....

Aronson: I'd like to go back to the end of your review. [*Les Temps modernes*, vol. 79, May 1952, 2070-9]. In the last paragraph you seem to be holding your hand out to Camus.

Jeanson: Yes, it may be so. I don't remember very well. [*Looks at the article*] Oh yes, I see. Yes, of course. "This very human voice is laden with such a real torment, one which I fear was very liable to concern us all." Yes, that was a sort of belief I had. "Why make it so completely alien to us, by sacrificing its very reality, by this pseudo-philosophy of a pseudo-history of revolutions?" Yes, I criticized him for making alien to us what could in fact unite us. "*L'Homme révolté* is above all a great failed book."

Aronson: You said it was a great failed book. But nothing in your article –

Jeanson: No, I know. We already talked about that. I cheated. I think Sartre cheated too, in his own way. We cheated because we were embarrassed to be so blunt, so cruel in our criticism. We could feel that our criticism was cruel, or at any rate I did. It was a book that seemed very important for him, and we'd been talking about it for six months and hadn't decided what we could say. Yes, we – well, I must stop saying "we" – I at any rate, it's true, I cheated, yes. In my opinion it wasn't a great book. A failed book, yes, it was. But when you say a book has failed, it's best to add "great." So as not to be too hurtful.

Aronson: And from there you go on: "Hence the myth that it has rapidly given rise to. We beg Camus not to yield to fascination, but to find in himself that personal accent thanks to which his work remains for us, despite everything" –

Jeanson: "Irreplaceable." Yes, in a way of course, Camus gave us in various forms, as he did when he edited *Combat*, a tonality of some importance. And one could completely disagree with his absurdism, but at the same time he could write well. Well, not in *L'Homme révolté*, true. But in *L'Etranger* he did. And afterwards he wrote *La Chute*. And *La Chute* is well written too, it's well done, it's very cunning but it's very good, maybe we'll talk about it some more. Yes, to be sure, I had to put in something so I would forgive myself for my cruelty. But when I use the word fascination, it's true, I think he was fascinated by his own success, and he thought he'd made it. And all

of a sudden we blew it up. And it was something he wanted very dearly. We understood that more clearly afterwards.

Aronson: That's why at the end of "Pour tout vous dire" you spoke of being relieved by criticizing the great moralist. Something important happened to you when you criticized Camus, didn't it?

Jeanson: Yes, maybe. But you know, I have no self-image, I never have had. There are people who have an image of me, and sometimes they tell me about it, but that doesn't lead me to have one. So you might say I experienced that like a lot of other things in my life. As if naturally, in a way. I didn't say to myself, "Oh how wonderful, I'm the cause of a tremendously important quarrel." No, I never say things like that, never. Luckily. My life is easier if I don't. It's good, it's comfortable.

Aronson: Let me quote from "Pour tout vous dire." "When I criticized your book, I not only noticed in a number of people, but also felt in myself, a curious phenomenon of inhibition, the feeling that in your case criticism didn't have quite the same rights."

Jeanson: Yes, but I didn't feel that when I wrote my criticism. Afterwards I heard people talking about the book. And I was amazed, I really was. You could say there are things that people make me discover and that I should have thought of myself. For example, when people said to me at that time, between 1947 and 1952, "How can you write for both *Esprit* [a Catholic socially committed review, founded in 1932 by the personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier] and *Les Temps modernes*?" I was completely taken aback by that question. I thought about it and I said, "It's true, that must be a problem," since it was one for them. So I started thinking about it, but I didn't get very far. But at first I was struck because for me it was not a problem, I could write where I liked.

Aronson: But you, inhibited?

Jeanson: Well, inhibition. "I not only noticed in a number of people, but also felt in myself, a curious phenomenon of inhibition, the feeling that in your case criticism didn't have quite the same rights." What I mean is, I didn't feel that when I wrote the review. It's a reflection after the fact. People were so flabbergasted that it happened, that I thought, "Oh my, what have I done? How could I

have done such a thing?” But in fact it didn’t bother me much, it didn’t make me ill. People made me understand that I really had my nerve. But it wasn’t meant to be a bold move. It became one, because of people’s opinion, because of their amazement. It’s always like that in life.

Aronson [reads]: “One could think certain things about your work, but it was felt that they shouldn’t be said. You were certainly a very public personage, but with all the privileges of the sacred. Albert Camus, in his essence the high priest.” That’s very striking.

Jeanson [reads]: “Camus, the high priest of absolute morality, forever this great voice soaring above all factions, this honour in reserve, and this maintenance somewhere of an irreducible imperative of disinterestedness. In short, it seemed to me that you were taboo. But I don’t like taboos and I detest in myself the temptation to respect them sometimes. So you can imagine the innocent pleasure to be derived from reading your letter.” But it’s true that the idea he was taboo only occurred to me after I’d written my review. When the letter was published, when my review was published. It was people’s amazement.

Aronson: What happened after that?

Jeanson: People read *Les Temps modernes* and they talked about it, there were articles in the papers. Everyone thought I had been incredibly bold. Some thought what I did was disgusting, well of course, they would. When it’s Thierry Maulnier or someone like that, I’m not worried. But the others almost admired me. I don’t know. They didn’t use the word courage, but that’s what they meant, it had taken a lot of courage. It hadn’t. But afterwards, I thought, “Yes, well ...”

Aronson: Because of his reputation.

Jeanson: Yes, and people realized that he wasn’t the sort of man to put up with attacks, and normally one shouldn’t dare. In fact I’m sure that if Sartre hadn’t written his article after Camus’s reply, I’d have been publicly burned at the stake. I have no doubt about it.... I think Camus felt he was sacrosanct.

Aronson: But as you know, what was at work in him was a sort of inferiority complex, not a superiority complex. Isn’t it so?

Jeanson: Well, yes and no. One mustn’t insist too much on that inferiority. No doubt he suffered from social inferiority in his childhood, but if you look at the life he led in Algeria, he conquered minds and won friends very quickly, he had successes and lived very comfortably. To be sure he had TB, he had worries, but I’ve had TB too, anybody can get it. That doesn’t explain anything. And in fact, I don’t think Camus had an unhappy childhood at all, I think even the obstacles he had to overcome, to win a scholarship for example, served to give him a certain self-assurance. Which immediately gave rise to successes with other people. He created teams, he directed plays. That’s not an unhappy life, my God, not at all! And he got published.

Aronson: Yes, but he was a provincial who came to Paris.

Jeanson: But he came to Paris in pretty good conditions. He was with Gallimard, there was Maria Casarès, he put on I don’t know how many plays. No, he’s no Rastignac.

Aronson: Have you reread *La Chute* since 1976?

Jeanson: I reread it yesterday. You’re making me do things.

Aronson: What do you think of it today?

Jeanson: Today. I must say I read it in 1962 when I came out of hiding. I don’t remember very well what I thought of it, but I do know my impression was quite favourable. I had the impression Camus was sort of asking to be forgiven for what he had done, admitting his guilt, but declaring us all guilty at the same time. I wasn’t too surprised [by that trick], but at the same time his invention of the penitent judge wasn’t bad, I liked it. So now I’ve reread it and I still think it’s just as good from the point of view of atmosphere, it’s well written, it works. But I’m less sure about what he was trying to do. I remember reading it and saying, that’s good, he’s accusing himself. But afterwards I said yes, but he’s accusing all of us.

And that’s what stands out most clearly now. I found a few little things, for example: “Moreover, we cannot assert the innocence of anyone, whereas we can state with certainty the guilt of all. Every

man testifies to the crime of all the others – that is my faith and my hope” (*The Fall*, New York, Vintage Books, 1956, 110). There’s something wrong here, because we live in the relative and it makes no sense to toss out the whole of humanity like that, and in the name of what, for what purpose? And I also noticed this: “Tell me, frankly, is there an excuse for that? There is one, but so wretched that I cannot dream of advancing it. In any case, here it is : I have never been really able to believe that human affairs were serious matters” (86). And the continuation of that passage is also most enlightening, I will read it to you if you like: “I had no idea where the serious might lie, except that it was not in all this I saw around me – which seemed to me merely an amusing game or tiresome. There are really efforts and convictions I have never been able to understand. I always looked with amazement, and a certain suspicion, on those strange creatures who died for money, fell into despair over the loss of a ‘position,’ or sacrificed themselves with a high and mighty manner for the prosperity of their family” (86-7).

Why take examples of that kind? There’s more than that to people, all the same! He throws away the whole of humanity in the name of – “I could better understand that of friend mine who had made up his mind to stop smoking, and through sheer will power had succeeded. One morning he opened the paper, read that the first H-bomb had been exploded, learned about its wonderful effects, and hastened to a tobacco shop” (87). Fine, very good. But then he goes on: “To be sure, I occasionally pretended to take life seriously. But very soon the frivolity of seriousness struck me, and I merely went on playing my role as well as I could. I played at being efficient, intelligent, virtuous, civic-minded, shocked, indulgent, fellow-spirited, edifying ... In short, there’s no need of going on, you have already grasped that I was like my Dutchmen who are here without being here: I was absent at the moment when I took up the most space” (87). He’s condemning all of us. Obviously he thinks we are all like that. And I agree that we are more or less so, but what’s the point [of condemning us for it]? We also have our positive side. We sometimes give meaning to what we do, and don’t just try to fool other people. [Camus has] an incredible point of view.

Aronson: But it’s a novel. [Clamence] is the protagonist of a novel. So it’s a construction by the author to make the protagonist say something.

Jeanson: Yes, but it’s all too clear what he means. All too clear. It’s a way of saying, “Listen, what you accused me of, you can accuse yourself of. We’re all in the same boat.”

Aronson: When he says “the frivolity of seriousness” he’s quoting Sartre.

Jeanson: Yes. “Camus, you’re so frivolous.”

Aronson: Have you looked at the quotations, because there are others where he quotes you: “Although I know how to keep my distance, I seize and and every opportunity. When I used to live in France, were I to meet an intelligent man I immediately sought his company. If that be foolish ... Ah, I see you smile at that use of the subjunctive. I confess my weakness for that mood and for fine speech in general. A weakness that I criticize in myself, believe me. I am well aware that an addiction to silk underwear does not necessarily imply that one’s feet are dirty. Nonetheless, ...” (5-6).

Jeanson: In what way is this a quotation?

Aronson: The reproach ...

Jeanson: For fine writing?

Aronson: In too high-flown a style.

Jeanson: Yes, maybe.

Aronson: What Clamence says about himself is what you and Sartre said. And at the beginning Clamence “is” Camus, as you saw, and then after about eighty pages, Clamence begins to be more and more like Sartre. He talks about freedom, he talks about commitment, and as he becomes Sartre he becomes hypocritical. As he becomes Sartre he becomes really nasty. It happens after the incident with the motorcyclist. That is a public humiliation, to which he can’t reply. So Clamence feels humiliated by the motorcyclist and he feels attacked, in fact he is physically attacked, but unable to say or do anything in reply. If you read Camus’ diaries, you find references to the public humiliation he can’t reply to. He says “I couldn’t reply,” and he explains why not. So here you have Camus’ feelings after the quarrel, and his attempts to settle the dispute.

You remember Clamence runs away from France to join the Resistance, and then he's put in a concentration camp. Perhaps Camus was thinking of you at that moment. And afterwards Clamence is treated as the pope of the concentration camp. Recall Sartre as "the pope of existentialism." After *La Chute* was published, Camus gave interviews in which he said that Clamence has nothing to do with him (Camus), he's based on the existentialists. In an interview with Dominique Aury he talked in particular about the existentialists' bad faith. So the character of Clamence is a sort of game of mirrors which begins with himself and then he turns into Sartre, and then he turns into everybody, as you just said. I also see in the book a sort of competition with *Huis clos*, because *La Chute* is a more economical hell. De Beauvoir calls it a sort of settling of accounts. She means: "between him and us."

Jeanson: I noted: "I have never been really sincere and enthusiastic except when I used to indulge in sports, and in the army, when I used to act in plays we put on for our own amusement" (87-8). That's Camus. Okay, the next part. "But who would consider such an attitude legitimate in the face of love, death, and the wages of the poor" (88)? There he's trying to be funny. How can anyone be so frivolous when talking about things like the wages of the dirt poor? He's trying to be funny. "Yet what can be done about it? I could imagine the love of Isolde," so now he's talking about love, "only in novels or on the stage. At times people on their deathbed seemed to me convinced of their roles" (88). So even the dying seemed to him to be acting their death! "The lines spoken by my poor clients always struck me as fitting the same pattern" (88). In other words, I guess, they all said the same thing. They weren't interesting. "Whence, living among men without sharing their interests, I could not manage to believe in the commitments I made" (88). He's telling us we commit ourselves in a completely fictitious manner – I would almost say, a virtual one. "I was courteous and indolent enough, to live up to what was expected of me in my profession, my family, or my civic life, but each time with a sort of indifference that spoiled everything. I lived my whole life under a double code, and my most serious actions were often the ones in which I was the least involved" (88-9). He's accusing everyone who thinks, and who at bottom are never actually doing what they're talking about.

Aronson: It's a sort of double confession, because Camus himself is also confessing. He talks about the theater, and –

Jeanson: Yes, of course, it's about him. But at the same time he's beating *our* breast.

How does it go on? Oh yes, this is very strange too. His absolute character comes out, his sense of the absolute. "A ridiculous fear pursued me. One could not die without having confessed all one's lies. Not to God, nor to one of His representatives, I was above that, as you can imagine. No, I had to confess them to people, to a friend, or to a beloved woman for example. Otherwise, even if there were only one single lie hidden in a life, death made it permanent. Nobody would ever again know the truth about that point, since the only person who knew it was the dead man, asleep in his secret. This absolute master of a truth made me dizzy." That's just fabulous! That's myth!

Aronson: It's like *Les Jeux sont faits*.

Jeanson: For example, yes. Except that Sartre doesn't take it seriously. For Sartre the game is never over. It's like in *Huis clos*, they aren't dead. And besides, for Sartre there is no truth that you would want at any price. Simone de Beauvoir was a bit inclined to believe in it. She had this fantasy of a huge tape recorder which would record everything. And also a fantasy of complete transparency between two people. Which was absolutely not their case. Well, on the intellectual level it was. They exchanged ideas and held nothing back. They held nothing back even about their sexual escapades. But it was really, to my mind, contemptuous to tell things like that, saying I experienced this and that. And is that truth? No. It's something you do to give yourself pleasure, to tell yourself I'm a good person, I admit what I do. Bravo.

Aronson: That's part of Beauvoir's myth about her relationship with Sartre.

Jeanson: Her relationship with Sartre is completely false. For a while, it's true Sartre – I didn't even understand it, because I didn't know him then. He took pleasure in writing long letters to her, in which he described to her everything he experienced. I don't see the point of that game, but anyway. They had sworn to tell each other everything. And also according to this oath, they could have side affairs, but their affair was the serious one. In reality it was clear that the serious affairs for Simone de Beauvoir were the so-called side affairs, for example with Nelson Algren. And Sartre's affair with Dolores,

that wasn't just a passing fancy, it was really – So in the end they didn't do what they wanted to. I feel that apart from the intellectual side, as a couple they were a failure, a complete failure. In my opinion, anyway. Besides, how can anybody be as savage as Simone de Beauvoir was afterwards, at the end of his life? If there had been any real tenderness between them – but there wasn't. There was no more sexual desire, there was no tenderness.

Aronson: After when?

Jeanson: It must have ended very soon. I can't tell you when, I didn't know them then. I only met them afterwards, in 1948. In my opinion it was over by then, I may be wrong. Even if it wasn't, it didn't last much longer, I'm sure. But I saw Simone de Beauvoir completely haggard-looking when Sartre went to see Dolores, I don't know what year that was. Not for love, but because she was feeling for maybe the first time that she'd failed. Saying to herself, yes, [his affair with Dolores] was serious. It's serious. And I saw her cry. She who was so proud, so sure of herself.

[Resumes reading from *La Chute*]. "I lived my life under a double code." But his belief can be applied any way you want, to any of us. But it's not true. I think it's a false description even of himself. I think it wasn't entirely true that he lived under a double code – in fact it's impossible. If you're schizophrenic, you're in the mental hospital. But in fact there's always a connection. So one isn't somewhere, as he would always like to be. Somewhere else, that is. At the junction of two things, but not in one or the other. Yet that's what he tells himself, never stops telling himself. Reality is not that simple.

Aronson: He's talking of a duplicity which is too simple, because inside it is a very simple hypocrisy: I think one thing and I do another. You're right.

Jeanson: Besides, you can tell he's prowling around the idea of bad faith. He doesn't say so, but it's Sartrean bad faith that he's condemning – by reading into that idea something which it's not. Which is quite different, in fact. Sartrean bad faith is not hypocrisy.

Aronson: No, because you're hiding something from yourself.

Jeanson: So it's a false accusation, even against himself I would say. That's not what it's about. It would be too simple.

Aronson: You're confirming my thinking.

Jeanson: Good, it's a pleasure to hear you say that.

Aronson: But nobody has ever pointed out [Camus' mistake].

Jeanson: I don't think people know how to read. I think they talk about books before they've read them. But he prowls around this question. He hasn't understood what [bad faith] is. To confuse that with hypocrisy is a pretty serious mistake.

And then there's this passage: "Until then I had always been aided by an extraordinary ability to forget. I used to forget everything, beginning with my resolutions. Fundamentally, nothing mattered. War, suicide, love, poverty got my attention, of course, when circumstances forced me, but a courteous, superficial attention. At times I would pretend to get excited about some cause foreign to my daily life. But basically I didn't really take part in it except, of course, when my freedom was thwarted. How can I express it? Everything slid off – yes, just rolled off me" (49). I hope he doesn't think everyone is like that. Besides, I don't think *he* was really like that. It's a radical accusation. Because he's always in the absolute. He makes a radical accusation and levels it at everybody. No more problems with human relations. It's all over. If that's how we all are, we can just go to bed, or move to another planet.

Aronson: Clamence is staying on the surface. I think Camus knows he's staying on the surface.

Jeanson: I would say he stays on the shore. He watches things go by. But it's not true that he was completely like that. At the same time it's true that his whole way of eliminating the political, the reality of conflicts and struggles, was also a way of staying completely on the shore. But at certain moments he couldn't stay there. He couldn't during the [Second World] War, when he edited *Combat*. It isn't true, he didn't cheat like that. He didn't pretend. For a while he let himself be affected. At that time he was affected. He wasn't on the shore at that time. Then after a while he retreated, he came back to shore, and he stayed there. But it isn't true that that's all he was. He was on the shore firstly because he was a *pied-noir*, he was on the shore because he couldn't become aware of the existence of the Arabs. It's as gross a mistake as that. But after that he didn't stay on the shore, because circumstances arose, events happened, the [Alger-

ian] war broke out. He really stopped being on the shore, but it didn't last, because in fact it was a position which wasn't his and he couldn't hold it. And he had disappointments at that time, because he felt the liberation wasn't going well, and he was right. Disappointments which offended his desire for the absolute. He wanted the liberation to be of perfect sumptuousness. And it wasn't. For example, there were women whose hair was cut off [*for being friendly with the Nazi occupiers*]. And I agree, that's disgusting, it's scandalous, it's one of the ugliest possible forms of male behavior. But not all the Resistance fighters did it. And it didn't prove that the liberation was rotten. The liberation wasn't rotten, certain aspects of it were, as in any struggle. But after a while he felt he had to reject all of it and retreat to the shore.

Aronson: But you're talking about the time when Sartre thought Camus was exemplary.

Jeanson: Yes, it's true.

Aronson: And was he exemplary?

Jeanson: No.

Aronson: For Sartre he was.

Jeanson: No, I don't think that's true either. I think it's more complicated than that. Certainly in Sartre's eyes Camus was exemplary in certain ways. Certainly because at that time he knew how to have a relative attitude. He became a relativist, and he did so with some fine gestures and valid appeals. But then he went back to his absolute. From then on they couldn't be friends. They seemed to be, because they were two great writers, and they met and celebrated some things in the evenings. That's all. Really it was over, very rapidly. I don't think Camus was with *Les Temps modernes* more than two years.

Aronson: He never joined the team.

Jeanson: There were two years when I wasn't there myself, 1945, 1946, perhaps 1947, I don't know, when there was no team. There were co-workers, sometimes distinguished people, but they didn't form a team. Then several of them left. And a team formed bit by bit, despite the problem of the disagreement between Sartre and Mer-

leau-Ponty. A team formed anyway, but not right at the beginning. There was no team of Leiris, Camus, and I forget who else was there.

Aronson: Ollivier, the Gaullist. Albert Ollivier.

Jeanson: Ah yes. I never knew him. In any case Camus can't have spent more than two years with *Les Temps modernes*, and not in a team.

Aronson: At the beginning of *La Chute* is the expression "the worthy ape." Clamence reflects contempt here, racism. Sartre reproached Camus because of you, after Camus ignored you, because he felt that was a sort of racism. The racism of somebody with a beautiful soul. He was better than others. Jeanson had an ugly soul. When Camus talks about the ape Clamence is being a bit racist, and he repeats it a few times in the first pages. Camus is making him this way to embrace Sartre's attack on him as racist.

Jeanson: I agree. Yes, it's possible, I understand.

Aronson: And later on, "the judge-penitent." Do you know that reference? He talked a lot about judge-penitents since 1952. Do you know who they are?

Jeanson: No.

Aronson: *Les Temps modernes*.

Jeanson: Is that what he wrote?

Aronson: That's what he wrote.

Jeanson: I *thought* it had to do with us, but -

Aronson: That year he wrote something that was only published long after his death, in 1984. He said it about the existentialists of *Les Temps modernes*. It's three pages he wrote after the August, 1952 issue of *Les Temps modernes* came out. And in it he talks about the judge-penitents who especially like to be enslaved.

Jeanson: Ah yes. That's a thing that keeps coming back in his letter to Sartre, this idea of enslavement. "Without even realizing it, you have chosen to be enslaved." That would have made some Commu-

nists of the time laugh, if they had been told they had chosen to be enslaved. Because in reality they were being set all sorts of questions, that they weren't happy about being asked.

Aronson: "I had a speciality: noble causes" (17). Here Camus is going back to your descriptions of him, to "My heart was on my sleeve."

Jeanson: Yes, on the sleeves of his lawyer's gown!

Aronson: "You would really have thought that justice slept with me every night." He's making fun of himself.

Jeanson: Yes, absolutely. Yes, that whole passage is about him. Though it's not only about him when he says "I was on the right side, that was enough to satisfy my conscience. The feeling of the law, the satisfaction of being right, the joy of self-esteem ..." (18). There he's lumping us with himself. He certainly had an image of us as people pleased with ourselves because we were right. He was completely mistaken, because we were searching, trying to see how to get the damn Communist party to move, how to persuade it to change without feeling attacked. It was a hell of a problem. But he thought we were like him, satisfied because we were right – not in the same way as him, but right. I think he felt that. And he didn't realize that at the time he wrote *L'Homme révolté*, that was his attitude but not ours. He projected his attitude onto ours. But he was sure he was right, for the good reason that he was in no danger of being wrong. He was adopting a position such that he was in no danger of being wrong. He wasn't on one side or the other, he was elsewhere. He was judging, but at that time he wasn't a judge-penitent.

Aronson: According to Camus, you were judge-penitents, because Sartre spoke of himself while attacking Camus. That's the style of the judge-penitent. "I attack you through talking about my own defects."

Jeanson: yes, that's the judge-penitent.

Aronson: But Camus is talking about Sartre in particular.

Jeanson: He's totalizing.

Aronson: On the last two pages of the novel, he is talking about hell. After confessing everything, he holds his hand out to the reader, "now that you are going to talk to me about yourself" (146).

Jeanson: "The please tell me what happened to you one evening, on the quays of the Seine and how you managed never to risk your life" (147).

Aronson: It a brilliant portrait of someone who merely places his armchair in the direction of history.

Jeanson: "How you managed never to risk your life" also means, "how you managed never to really commit yourself. Because you blame me for not being committed, but you aren't either." Now what does that mean? Let's say he's talking to Sartre. "Your commitment is fake, it's fictitious." Camus is saying that to Sartre.

Aronson: "At the the most important moment, you fell asleep at the Comédie Française." I think it's the same thing.

Jeanson: Yes. "What happened to you one evening on the quays of the Seine," that's the equivalent of -

Aronson: This is about Sartre and Camus. About Camus because Francine Camus kill herself. It's Camus' conscience speaking here. And then about Sartre concerning the liberation. Perhaps also about his attack on Camus.

Jeanson: What I find monstrous here is this passage: "I sensed that we were of the same species. Are we not all alike, constantly talking and to no one, forever up against the same questions although we know the answers in advance" (147)? Only Camus would take the liberty of saying that. It isn't true! To begin with we didn't claim to know the answers. No indeed. Those who knew the answers were those who thought history could have an end. But we didn't, we really didn't. And yet he lumped us and him together, "constantly talking and to no one." I've never had the impression I was talking to no one." It isn't true. "Forever up against the same questions," in other words questions he decided he wouldn't ask himself any more. So he settles the whole thing by saying we knew the answers beforehand. It's too easy....

He's afraid to commit himself. He doesn't say it in so many words, but "The water's so cold! But let's not worry! It's too late now. It will always be too late." That's awful. We're really in absurdism here, as in the heyday of that ideology. Right in it. He's gone right back to it.

Aronson: "You yourself utter the words that for years have never ceased echoing through my nights ... so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us" (147). If he had stopped there it would have been a bit different, but he continues till "Fortunately." Because he completes the circle, there's nothing to be done after he says that. If there were a chance left "of saving both of us," it wouldn't be so bad. Then everything isn't over.... But he goes on. "But let's not worry! It's too late now." So it's all over. My life is over.

Jeanson: But I think he assumed that already. It's really surprising, because it's also very cunning. Just imagine. "You yourself utter the words that for years have never ceased echoing through my nights ... so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us." In other words, I will get you to say those words. I will make you repent of the same thing as me. It's a bit much.... Sartre speaks to the Other in a different way. Even when he accuses himself, when he blames himself for things, when he corrects his own thought, as he always and constantly did. He spoke to people, not treating them as his adversaries from the outset, and tried to show them that there is always something to be done, always a meaning to be given. Always, in any situation, and he didn't try to suck them down with him. And when he told others he had made a mistake, it wasn't in order to say to them, 'Make this mistake with me.'

Aronson: Obviously, you see Camus' approach as connected with his effort to stand outside of history.

Jeanson: Camus' attitude is a sort of existential blockade, a refusal of the human condition. I revolt against a God who doesn't exist but who condemned me to this? I was unfairly condemned, in the name of what sort of justice, I don't know. Such a refusal of the human condition could only be supported either existentially or by metaphysical argument. Existentially, it must be admitted, everybody has the right to blockade themselves like that. But if you want to spread that attitude so others adopt it, if you think it is the only

right one, then you need an argument, and that argument must be metaphysical. Because it ignores the ontology of the human condition. And that's absurdism. A refusal of meaning and a renunciation of giving meaning.

Then the other possible interpretation, and that is a moral blockade. The false situation of an Algerian *pied-noir* with an acute conscience. And this moral blockade could only take the form of a refusal to adopt any position, any political commitment. In the margin I wrote "except negative." Any political commitment except a negative one. In the same way I wrote "refusal to practise history." Behind all that is a very keen love of life, of women, of success, which constantly underlay and made possible the act of writing, the realization of his work. In spite of everything, we mustn't forget that he also produced a body of work. We can think of it what we like, but it's an achievement. And besides, despite all he wrote, there was also in him that love of life. In fact I shouldn't say "also." There was that love of life, the other side of the coin being a refusal of reality. Because reality is all annoyances and complications. And there are conflicts, there's history. And women too, no doubt about it, were very important for him, and so was success. You only have to look at how he took the failures he suffered, how he dealt with them: very badly. Not just the business with *L'Homme révolté*. He had failures in the theatre, he took them very badly. Because at bottom he started out in life with the assurance that he'd won. He'd done it, he'd made his name. And it's true that people talked to him as if he could no longer lose, especially after he got the Nobel Prize – that was the final touch. I almost said it enabled him to put up with everything else. Well, that's true too. He had that, he had a sort of success.

Aronson: I think that what blocked him, what stopped him, was his colonial identity. If you read *L'Etranger*, he is trying to seize reality in a physical sense. But what reality? The reality of Algiers. The great Algerian novel is a colonial novel, in a sense *because* of its sand, sun and sea – possessing the physical things is at the center of the colonial identity. But these weren't the reality of Algeria.

Jeanson: Have you noticed that in *Noces* there isn't a single Algerian? Not one.

Aronson: In *L'Etranger* there are three of them.

Jeanson: But joking apart, even in *Le Premier homme*, Camus never talks about the Algerians, not once.

Aronson: Yet *Le Premier homme* was written in part to understand contemporary reality.... The revolution, the FLN. He wrote it in 1958-59 to describe Algerian reality before it disappeared.

Jeanson: But all he's describing is the colonial reality!...

Aronson: In a sense it's a colonial fantasy, his refusal to understand.

Jeanson: Yes, that's exactly what it is. But refusal to understand shouldn't go so far as to deny that the others exist! You never see the others in his work. When I reread *Le Premier homme* because you were coming, I said to myself this is incredible, surely some time I'm going to turn a page and there'll be an Arab.

Aronson: There are some.

Jeanson: Well, in the corner of a café, sure, but that doesn't count, that's nothing. That's your good Arab.

Aronson: And from time to time there's a bad Arab, a bomb-thrower.

Jeanson: Ah yes, that's true. He understood nothing about that. Nothing, and he's so serene.... But it's the serenity of the ostrich. I don't understand how you can be Camus, and have met so many people and done so many things, and been led to think about lots of problems, and still write *Le Premier homme* like that. I do not understand. Something's wrong. Then at one point I said to myself: "Ah, I've got it, there's the Holy Trinity, there's the Father, there's the Son and the Holy Spirit, in other words the Mother. The Mother is really the absolute idol." Absolute. All the more absolute because she can't defend herself, she can't even talk.... I don't mind if he's very attached to his mother, even if in reality there was a long period when he didn't have much to do with her. But in fact he has no real contact with her. Like the Holy Spirit, it's a sort of permanent alibi. It's an amazing relationship with his mother considering that in the last analysis she doesn't exist for him. But when he sees her again, she's his idol. It's completely beyond me.

Aronson: Because in the core of his emotions there is a sort of lack which never speaks in its own voice. It's a silent lack.

Jeanson: What surprises me is that I have read people who maintain we have to take into account the fact that Camus had a very hard childhood. But he didn't! It isn't true at all. He himself says he had a delightful, extraordinary childhood. And it's true, when he gives details, you say to yourself my God, what the hell difference does it make if he was poor, he was rich with a whole lot of things that only happened down there and could only happen down there. And certainly not among the rich. What happened to him was the best that could happen to anyone. And he also had a brilliant primary school teacher, and then he had Grenier, and he never stopped feeling happy. Everywhere. From time to time he does bring in a thought to pin down a sort of, I would almost call it, distress. But it's fake. It's fake. Maybe his mother and grandmother lived in poverty, but he didn't. Being a child, a child in Algiers, he couldn't be. Not under the colonial regime. At bottom he lacked for nothing. Well, he didn't have a franc to go to the circus, stuff like that, but that's nothing. And he had joys, not a rich kid's joys, but –

Aronson: But didn't he have an inferiority complex towards the rich?

Jeanson: Yes, towards the rich, but that passed. Inferior, who hasn't felt inferior to someone? I mean even in our own lives, in so-called civilized societies. It's true that when you're a child you always have the impression that you don't know what's going on, that something's wrong. He had an amazing childhood and he himself told us about it When they had fights, they weren't too terrible, and what's more they managed to keep it among themselves. The Arabs only came into the picture forty years later. It's when he goes back to those places that the Arabs appear....

Aronson: *Le Premier homme* is a sort of farewell to Algeria. When he was writing it, he realized that Algeria was being lost. And that was his way of realizing it.

Jeanson: So what does the title mean?

Aronson: Well, Adam ...

Jeanson: What does Adam have to do with it? The title has to be justifiable one way or another. I don't understand that title.

Aronson: It's interesting. *Le Premier homme* doesn't work as a title.

Jeanson: That's my impression too. I'd have been surprised if he could have gotten it to work. It's a bit of a whopping lie, *Le Premier homme*. You have to have a high opinion of yourself. It's narcissistic, and yes, it's colonialist. So I don't understand. And there are people open-mouthed with admiration at the thing....

Aronson: I'd like to criticize Camus for having really hidden from the real Algerians ... But I'd also like to criticize Sartre for the violence of his remarks. ...

Jeanson. Ah yes, the preface to Frantz Fanon. Yes, I understand. I have already had to answer that question. I was interviewed recently, for a film, they sent me the tape afterwards. What I said, I developed the point at length but they cut some of it out of the film, is that it was normal for Sartre to be violent. It was perhaps ...regrettable, in so far as many readers wouldn't understand. But I think it was the violence of someone who is acutely aware of all the violence being exercised on the colonized. And that you might say that these are accounts which deserve to be settled from time to time. I think he very much wanted to show the Europeans that they couldn't hide behind their violence. And that there was violence on the other side but that it was liberating violence, a violence that people needed because they had been subject to servitude for too long. And I think that given that situation, it was normal for him to start using violent language. I think it was perhaps the only way he could find to try to be taken seriously. Perhaps he would have succeeded better if he had adopted a calm ironic tone ... But there are moments when you feel like letting fly. You want to say, you know, they are perfectly capable of doing to you what you have done to them, but they will be in the right because of what you have inflicted on them. Don't imagine you are sheltered from violence. And their violence is your doing. So when he says that people who have long been oppressed no doubt need to pass through violence in order to restructure themselves, to structure themselves, I think he's not far wrong. Of course that can have less good results too, but some people feel that need. Either I get crushed or ... Besides, I'd like to play some part in conquering this freedom I was refused. If I didn't fight for it, who am I? A lot of

people were given independence and freedom just like that, as a gift from heaven. So I think all of that enters into it. Besides, Fanon is violent too. There are some remarkable analyses in *Les Damnés de la terre*, some of them four or five pages long....

Aronson: Let us come back one last time to your and Sartre's conflict with Camus. Do you recall Roger Stéphane's remarks in September 1951, when he wrote a preface to *L'Observateur*'s excerpts of your exchange of letters? He said Sartre and Camus had two different fundamental attitudes towards the world and towards politics. This implies that both attitudes are legitimate. But when you strongly criticize Camus' attitudes, you see his ideas as wrong.... Am I right?

Jeanson: No, I don't think so, because I think everything Camus says boils down to a refusal and not to an idea. So I wouldn't be contrasting two ideas. I'm dealing with two completely different things.... At a pinch I could have understood him if he had maintained a hard-line absurdist position, why not? I can understand that. Do you know [Emile] Cioran? I don't share his pessimism, but at least he's coherent. You say to yourself okay, the day he's had enough of it, he'll kill himself and then it'll all be over. But not Camus, you can't say that of him. And in *L'Homme révolté* he cheats, because he tries to escape from what is obviously intolerable about his absurdism. Untenable. The absurdist position is untenable, but -

Aronson: You're right.

Jeanson: Or rather it's tenable at a personal level, but you can only share that view with yourself.

Aronson: ... But I think that in Camus there are two other things. One, there is a political moral sensitivity.

Jeanson: I wouldn't call it political, but moral, yes.

Aronson: Mind you, Camus never stopped talking politics, but you will say it wasn't the real thing.

Jeanson: It wasn't the real thing. I don't know what kind of politics consists of keeping out of politics.

Aronson: No, Camus had a political position. Anti-Communism was a political position ...

Jeanson: I don't think so.

Aronson: Then there's the stand he took on Algeria. That was political.

Jeanson: I don't think so. I can't say. Why? Because he took a stand that isn't one, that is to say, which consists in avoiding the political aspect of the problem. Do you see what I mean? They are false stands because they consist in avoiding the political aspect of the problem. So they are moral stands, if you like. They are the positions of a certain morality. Not mine, but a certain morality. But they aren't political. In fact, they exist to avoid having to take a political stand.

Aronson: Towards Communism?

Jeanson: Well now, that I don't know, but how can you call it a political stand when he writes *L'Homme révolté* and says, you see, it's all –

Aronson: Yes, but you're talking about his political philosophy! His stand against the Soviet Union over Berlin in 1953 was really a political stand. He talked about the slaughter of the workers. When he talked about revolution, he spoke out against it. Isn't that a sort of politics?

Jeanson: ... Condemning the Soviet Union, everyone did that. *Les Temps modernes* did that. There were the Soviet concentration camps, and we knew all about those too. What was he adding by saying what he said, if he didn't try to question himself about what was happening in the rest of the world, and in particular in France?

Aronson: Yes, I agree with you. For a political stand, it was partial and limited.

Jeanson: Looking through the wrong end of the telescope. No use at all. What I mean by politics is an attitude which commits you, which makes you speak out when you have the means to express yourself. And you will tell me he had the means to speak out and be heard worldwide. Fine. And he spoke out, and he said, "That's not nice." What use is that? How do you talk to people in France, for

example, who still think Communism is going to defend them? That's politics for me. That's concrete reality. It isn't just condemning from a distance whatever you like, that's easy, my conscience feels good and I'm right. But then what? Politics always asks that question, "Then what?"

Aronson: But at that time there were two historical currents. Two currents on the left. Was only one of them valid?

Jeanson: No, I wouldn't say only one of them was valid. Not at all. We were in this impossible situation, which some people liked a lot, because they could take a stand on one side or the other. But we couldn't do that. That was obvious when the Korean war broke out. We couldn't. Neither position was valid.

Aronson: But you had to choose.

Jeanson: The only reason – I'm speaking for myself and nobody else – the only reason which made me feel like choosing, which led me to choose, was the fact that the French working class was still there....

Aronson: But you could call Sartre a fellow-traveller.

Jeanson: No, he never was.

Aronson: No? Not from 1952 to 1956?

Jeanson: From 1952 to 1956 he also passed his time saying things – because, notice, there are things he said about Communism in general, and there are things he said to the French Communists. Which they didn't like at all. Especially not when they realized Sartre got on better with the Italian Communists.

Aronson: But I think you were more independent than Sartre.

Jeanson: No doubt. More independent because after all, nobody gave a damn what I thought. I was independent, Sartre couldn't be. But the question to ask today is, "Can we learn something from Sartre's thought as he expressed it at the time, which is the only thought of his we have, and from Camus' thought as *he* expressed it at the time?" Now I can see that people think there is a lot to learn from Camus' thought, because it suits them perfectly, as a way to

avoid politics and all political parties. Camus' thought as they know it is ideal for not having to take a political stand. That's what they like about it. At the same time, it has a noble side which is very comforting for people who today are living in the most awful intellectual poverty. Fine, it helps them live. I wish them every possible comfort from it, but I wouldn't say it has any political value. Quite simply, I think that in Camus there is a sort of dogged obstinacy about something which our contemporaries are less and less interested in. It's going out of fashion. And on this score, even if I detest the word, I think Camus' thought has a certain nobility, which would do good for a some people I know, if they would only be inspired by it. I grant you that. He obstinately insists that the moral point of view, a moral preoccupation, is fundamental. What I don't like in Camus is that he thinks he is the only moral person. But when he says morality is fundamental, I'm not bothered. For me there are two essential preoccupations which are linked together, morality and politics. So given the moral desertion of our time, if his ideas gave them back a bit of muscle tone, even if I they talked to me about becoming more noble, I'd be happy. Because at present we are not moving towards nobility but towards decadence.

In Sartre's case the problem is very different, because nobody reads Sartre today, I'm pretty much convinced of that, and yet everyone is more or less steeped, soaked in his ideas. Sartre's thought developed quite differently from Camus'. It developed from its own contortions, from tentacles, radiating in various ways, and our contemporaries, not just people today, were very soon inspired by Sartre without knowing it. They didn't realize they were talking Sartre, they didn't understand that. Something was happening, a sort of electric current was flowing and touching them, and they didn't know where it was coming from. They were just talking Sartre in a certain way, they were living certain aspects of his thought. Or more accurately I would say they were living according to the essential tone of Sartre's thought, the one which can touch anyone, everyone, this tone of a moral imperative. But not a moral imperative like Camus', in other words not idealistic. Sartre's moral imperative is always reminding itself that morality is both impossible and necessary. And that's the truth in the history of morality. And Camus thought morality was possible provided you withdrew from the world and offered an abstract morality as an alternative. So there is something to be preserved in Sartre, but in a way it's preserving itself, it's entered our moral system. Except that today, and let's say for the last ten years or so, we've had great difficulty because we're

resigning ourselves to a situation we're not in control of, which is beyond us, and we really need someone to say, "Let's shake ourselves here, what's wrong with us?" Instead of which we're asking for more comfort, more forgetfulness. More and more we're behaving like ostriches. That's the problem. Sartre would be very useful now, because again there is this enormous difficulty and we let it develop during what we call "The Thirty Glorious Years." We let it happen. We freewheeled, so to speak.

Aronson: "The Thirty Glorious Years"?

Jeanson: Yes, the years between the war and Pompidou. And we paid dearly for it. Because during that time we got into the habit of expecting to be given everything and letting the government decide for us. We were all permanently on social assistance, even the rich. There was an economic euphoria. Then there was a wake-up call about 1980, but at first it wasn't heard very clearly. Especially since the Socialists were elected and somewhat camouflaged the problem they were confronted with, but once it became obvious they had no idea how to deal with it. So now we are having to tackle a problem we didn't see coming, we didn't understand it was developing, and now it's completely beyond us, and for the time being we have no resource except to cling on to things that are lost. Including our own structures, even though they are one of the wonders of the world. French democracy is really something unheard of. It's a democracy with no democrats. That's the embarrassing thing. But the democratic structures are fine, they're solid. It keeps on working and we like to think it will perhaps still serve our purpose. It won't. It's fooling us. And the awakening will be all the ruder. We already had one awakening when we started taking about the "social divide," we began to realize our leaders were helpless. But we're in for an even ruder awakening, when we will find ourselves completely destitute, because our structures, however wonderful, will be no use any longer. So it's from that point that we have to get a real grip on things, and rebuild some kind of society, and I think we can draw inspiration more from Sartre's thought than Camus'. That's what I can say about the present-day situation.