

“A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND”: AN EXISTENTIALIST
READING OF FREDRICK CLEGG IN *THE COLLECTOR*
BY JOHN FOWLES

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This essay analyses the influence of French Existentialism in John Fowles's *The Collector*, making use of three of Albert Camus's works, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, *L'Étranger*, and *L'Homme révolté*, and how the protagonist of John Fowles's novel fits the pattern of the absurd man established by Camus. *The Collector* is not only just an allegorical representation of the power struggle between the Few and the Many, a recurrent topic in the fictions of Fowles; it is also a practical example of the evil nature of Camus's absurd man, stemming from his absurd innocence. Clegg, like Meursault, the protagonist of *L'Étranger*, is an isolated (anti)hero who struggles against his passions in an existence of the Absurd. A Tantalus-like figure, the collector's aimless efforts are the fruit of chance. He is a stranger in a strange land of Existence provoking the nausea, in Sartre's terms, of both Miranda and the reader.

Key words: 1950s English literature, John Fowles, *The Collector*, Existentialism, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, the absurd, intertextuality, *The Tempest*

“L'homme absurde, qui est-il? Celui qui, sans le nier, ne fait rien pour l'éternel. Non que la nostalgie lui soit étrangère. Mais il lui préfère son courage et son raisonnement. Le premier lui apprend à vivre sans appel et se suffire de ce qu'il a, le second l'instruit de ses limites. Assuré de sa liberté à terme, de sa révolte sans avenir et de sa conscience périssable, il poursuit son aventure dans le temps de sa vie.”
(Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942: 93)

The Collector (1963) is the impressive first published novel by John Fowles. It stands at the very end of the literature of the 50s, “The Movement”, whose main issue was

¹ “What, in fact, is the absurd man? He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime” (Camus, 1988: 64)

portrayed by the rebellion without a cause of antiheroes such as Arthur Seaton,² or the American Haulden Caulfield.³ Frederick Clegg, the collector in Fowles's novel, embodies that kind of aimless anti-hero who rebels against society and humanity without any kind of deep reason, enabling the author to criticize the behaviour glamorized in Movement fiction, in the theatre of the Angry Young Men, and in the pictures starred by James Dean, while introducing at the same time most of his philosophical ideas on life and being, percolated through the prism of Existentialism. In John Fowles's own words: "I also wanted to attack [...] the contemporary idea that there is something noble about the inarticulate hero" (in Vipond ed., 1999: 1).

The work of John Fowles has already been widely criticised. In general terms, this novel has been accused of presenting just the theme of power "struggle in its simplest form" (Cooper, 1991: 1), and even of being "technically and intellectually Fowles's least ambitious novel" (p. 20). Indeed, the novel is overtly explicit on the question of power, as it is in this and in every other novel by John Fowles, a writer who has invariably been highly conscious about the presentation of freedom pictured "always *in extremis*" (Conradi, 1982: 26). As Susana Onega has pointed out:

From the thematic point of view, every novel deals in one way or another with Fowles's major concern, human freedom, focused from two major perspectives. From the point of view of man in isolation, freedom is presented as a process of individualization of the self; from the point of view of man in relation to society, as a power-bondage relationship (1989: 165).

In the situation presented in *The Collector*, Clegg is not only isolated from society (a realm he despises), he also imposes his authority over Miranda Grey, in the sense of forcing her into a power-bondage relationship.

Still, the meaning of *The Collector* is far more complex than just the issue of freedom. As the author himself has pointed out, the novel expresses Fowles's concern with Heraclitus's philosophical ideas in general and the distinction between the Few (*hoi aristoí*) and the Many (*hoi polloi*) in particular. Fowles analyses this pre-Socratic philosophy in his collection of *pensées*, *The Aristos* (1964, revised in 1968), where he also comments on the writing of *The Collector*. The opposition between the Many and the Few is expressed in these terms:

Heraclitus saw mankind divided into a moral and intellectual *élite* (the *aristoi*, the good ones, *not* – this is a later sense – the ones of noble birth) and an unthinking, conforming mass – *hoi polloi*, the many [...]. One cannot deny that Heraclitus has, like some in itself innocent weapon left lying on the ground, been used by reactionaries: but it seems to me that his basic contention is *biologically* irrefutable (author's italics, Fowles, 1980: 9).

Although these ideas also affect the meaning of *The Collector*, in the novel this simplistic, manichean vision is dodged by means of several variations where the role of the "good" is not completely clarified. Indeed, the story portrays the confrontation

² The protagonist of Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), a novel mentioned in *The Collector*.

³ The protagonist of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).

between a representative of the Many (Clegg) imposing his will over a representative of the Few (Miranda). As Fowles puts it in *The Aristos*: "The actual evil in Clegg overcame the potential good in Miranda. I did not mean by this that I view the future with a black pessimism; nor that a precious *élite* is threatened by the barbarian hordes" (1980: 10). Between the ideal *aristos* and the ideal *pollos*, there are many intermediate states, and both characters in *The Collector* display many psychological traits which add a great complexity to Heraclitus's ideas. This is what Mahmoud Salami points to when he states: "Miranda and Clegg represents a conflict not only between but within each other, and not only between minds but within a mind" (1992: 46-7).

But *The Collector* is even more complex than Salami's remark suggests. The shadow of Existentialism hovers over the whole novel, adding to it a specific ideological stance. John Fowles was clearly influenced by this philosophical trend, headed by Sartre, Camus and Kierkegaard, especially from 1947 onwards, when the young writer-to-be joined the Maison Française in Oxford and started reading Old and Medieval French as well as Existentialism. All in all, Fowles's ideas in connection with this philosophical movement may be said to have evolved from a pessimistic conception of the world, with an important presence of Camus's work, very much in the line of Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd, towards a more optimistic and positive conception of existence already perceptible in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, 1969, and made manifest in *Daniel Martin*, 1977. Therefore, *The Collector* should be placed within that first pessimistic phase. The influence of Albert Camus in the novel is clear and at some points becomes a kind of everpresent intertextual referent, even if not as evident as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The aim of this essay is to explore the way in which Camusian Existentialism affects the composition and meaning of *The Collector*, and how Frederick Clegg, the collector of the title, embodies many of the French philosopher's ideas, especially the figure of *l'homme absurde*.

Albert Camus's ideas are mainly collected in three important works: *L'Étranger* (1942), *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), and *L'Homme révolté* (1951). Although Camus himself expressed his opposition to Existentialism, mainly to the existentialist "optimism" that prescribes the acceptance of tragedy because it gives relief from anxiety, his ideas cannot be separated from Sartre's work and from the Existentialist movement. Camus's is a decadent pessimistic conception of life and meaning, where only the "absurd" man can reach a moderate happiness. And with this absurdity Clegg can be identified. Let us consider briefly the main ideas of Camus *absurde*.

Ce monde en lui-même n'est pas raisonnable, c'est tout ce qu'on en peut dire. Mais ce qui est absurde, c'est la confrontation de cet irrationnel et de ce désir éperdu de clarté dont l'appel résonne au plus profond de l'homme. L'absurde dépend autant de l'homme que du monde (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942: 37).⁴

Keeping in mind this simple example of Camusian premises, a link can be established with *The Collector*. Camus argues that the absurd comes from the

⁴ "This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world" (Camus, 1988: 26).

confrontation between irrationality (*irrationnel*) and a desperate craving for clarity or meaning (*désir éperdu de clarté*). From this perspective it could be stated that the irrational side in Fowles's story is represented by the character of Clegg, whereas Miranda Grey embodies the longing for meaning and clarity, the human quest for understanding. Camus's distinction brings to mind Heraclitus's ideas of the Many (Clegg), as an unthinking mass controlled by irrationality, and the Few (Miranda), always searching for the meaning of life and Existence (with a capital "E", in the sense of human existence, as employed by Pollman, 1973).

Another important subject for the construction of the theory of the Absurd is the question of contradictory behaviour. Camus expresses this fact in *Le mythe de Sisyphe*:

'C'est absurde' veut dire: 'c'est impossible', mais aussi: 'c'est contradictoire'. Si je vois un homme attaquer à l'arme blanche un groupe de mitrailleuses, je jugerai que son acte est absurde. Mais il n'est tel qu'en vertu de la disproportion qui existe entre son intention et la réalité qui l'attend (1942: 47).⁵

Absurdity, then, lies in the contradiction brought about by a cause-effect relationship. The feeling of the absurd is created by the unstable bond between one's yearnings and the following reaction. This is what actually happens in Clegg's case. He loves Miranda in a Platonic, idealistic way, in the private fairy-tale world of his imagination, and the reaction this fact produces in him is disproportionate in relation to his expectations. Simply stated, Clegg, prompted by his yearnings, kidnaps Miranda (later on, he will be responsible for her death), becoming himself the absurd man who looks for disproportionate solutions. Thus, although he can be considered a monster, "an aloof and ogre-like monster" who "frustrates the possibility of his own and of Miranda's self-maturation" (Onega, 1996: 40), Clegg is in fact affirming himself as an absurd man in an absurd Camusian world. The monstrosity that Clegg represents is the possibility that such an absurd world should invade the realm of knowledge and rationalism. In this sense, Leo Pollman's ideas on Camus's ideology are very illuminating. Camus has been said not to care about the "existentiality of Existence." Rather the contrary. His main concern may be said to be the lack of meaning the subject faces in life, the feeling of being outside any possible meaningful relationship, and this considered just as something the individual has to overcome (Pollman, 1973: 169). In fact, this lack of sense is what makes Clegg a dangerous psychopath, standing outside the borders of what is considered to be the realm of conscious behaviour, regulated by moral principles and social laws. Clegg's absurd world is legislated by his own rules, coming not only from his imagination, but also from his Nonconformist background and his biological limitation, all of which reflect Fowles's class consciousness, and those rules prevent him from having any kind of relationship with any external subject. Cut out from the possibility of any kind of human relationship, he is plunged into the world of the Absurd.

⁵ " 'It's absurd' means 'it's impossible,' but also 'it's contradictory.' If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine-guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd. But it is so solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter" (Camus, 1988: 33).

The conjunction of all these ideas leads to a final pessimistic statement: human existence is radically absurd. All human cravings are the product of this ineffable quality of human Existence. In Camus's own words:

Avant de rencontrer l'absurde, l'homme quotidien vit avec des buts, un souci d'avenir ou de justification (à l'égard de qui ou de quoi, ce n'est pas la question)[...]. Penser au lendemain, se fixer un but, avoir des préférences, tout cela suppose la croyance à la liberté, même si l'on s'assure parfois de ne pas la ressentir [...]. La mort est là comme seule réalité (1942: 80-81).⁶

In the novel, this description of human existence is clearly portrayed by Miranda. In her cell(ar) she keeps on thinking about the possibility of being free, about the anguish of the future and the necessity of justifying everything that is happening to her. This behaviour is what destroys her. She is unable to face her real Existence, and thus, she is not able to face an existential/absurd world. In contrast to Miranda, Clegg lives without aim. He felt the impulse to love Miranda, but according to his narration, everything that happens, even kidnapping her, is not planned, everything is the product of chance. Aimless Clegg triumphs over Miranda on reaching the "essence" of Existential reality. Even winning the pools, which enables him to commit his atrocities, is just the result of pure chance. As Fowles puts it in *The Aristos*: "Hazard, the great factor we shall never be able to control, will always infest life with inequality" (1964: 11); hazard plunges Miranda into the underworld, and provokes Clegg's "evolution" into an absurd man.

This is what makes Clegg feel completely innocent from everything. Just as Meursault in Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942), Clegg does not feel responsible for having committed any immoral act. In *Le mythe de Sisyphe* Camus depicts this aspect of the absurd man: "On voudrait lui faire reconnaître sa culpabilité. Lui se sent innocent. A vrai dire, il ne sent que cela, son innocence irréparable. C'est elle qui lui permet tout" (pp. 75-76).⁷ Clegg does not feel guilty because he is acting correctly within his own principles (in this sense he is the "aloof and ogre-like monster", as Onega pointed out (1996: 40)), and within those moral premises, he is innocent and far more correct than many of Miranda's friends. He even tries to justify himself at the end of the first part of his narration: "What I am trying to say is that it all came unexpected. I know what I did next day was a mistake, but up to that day I thought I was acting for the best and within my rights" (Fowles, 1998: 113). At this point he feels some kind of remorse. But this feeling is quickly repressed by that "irreparable innocence" which characterizes the absurd man, and so he exclaims: "Those last days I had to be sorry for her (as soon as I knew it wasn't acting), and I forgave her all the other business. Not while she was living, but when I knew she was dead, that was when I finally forgave her" (p. 274). Clegg's detachment from Miranda's death grows according to his acceptance of the absurd

⁶ "Before encountering the absurd, the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification (with regard to whom or what is not the question) [...]. Thinking of the future, establishing aims for oneself, having preferences — all this presupposes a belief in freedom, even if one occasionally ascertains that one doesn't feel it [...]. Death is there as the only reality" (Camus, 1988: 56).

⁷ "An attempt is made to get him to admit his guilt. He feels innocent. To tell the truth, that is all he feels — his irreparable innocence. This is what allows him everything" (Camus, 1988: 53).

world to the point of uttering the following statement: “I was acting as if I killed her, but she died, after all. A doctor probably could have done little good, in my opinion” (p.281). In his mind Clegg transforms himself into Miranda’s victim. She has died, and her death has brought him many unexpected problems. In keeping with this view, Clegg tries to arouse the reader’s sympathy for his absurd situation.

Furthermore, within the sphere of his religious background, Clegg reacts passively to Aunt Annie’s behaviour — he never rebels openly, uttering his thoughts —. The family is Nonconformist, dissenters of the official Protestant English Church. In this sense, Clegg is also isolated not only from God but also from the religious mainstream in England. Thus, his religious behaviour fits the pattern of the Camusian absurd man, as it is defined in this religious aspect in *Le mythe de Sisyphe*:

Il n’est qu’une morale que l’homme absurde puisse admettre, celle qui ne se sépare pas de Dieu: celle qui se dicte. Mais il vit justement hors de ce Dieu. Quant aux autres morales (j’entends aussi l’immoralisme), l’homme absurde n’y voit que des justifications et il n’a rien à justifier. Je pars ici du principe de son innocence (Camus, 1942: 94).⁸

For Clegg, the notion of God is something he does not really care about. His religious ideas depart from the negative description of Aunt Annie and her beliefs. The reader is supposed to sympathise with Clegg against his aunt when she constantly repeats to him how lucky he is for having legs to walk, in contrast to his cousin Mabel, who is disabled. But this sympathy is broken when Clegg shows his real personality, and remarks: “I don’t blame her [Aunt Annie], it was natural, especially with a daughter who’s a cripple. I think people like Mabel should be put out painlessly” (Fowles, 1998: 16). God, his behaviour towards Annie and Mabel, and later on towards Miranda, are, as Fowles insists, a matter of upbringing. Chance has decided that he should be born in a family which has made him what he actually is; therefore, it is not completely his fault. And to this fact the biological question is to be linked. As one of the Many, Clegg is biologically less gifted and prepared than Miranda to become a moral being; in this sense, the danger he represents is the possibility of the masses controlling the Few. Therefore, Clegg rebels against the complete system of creation with his disproportionate reactions and behaviour. In other words, Clegg’s response against all his existence may be said to follow the pattern of a Camusian absurd (anti)hero.

The last point to be considered in the description of the absurd man in *Le mythe de Sisyphe* is the theme of “*le Don Juanisme*” (Camus, 1942: 97). According to Camus, the greater the love, the more consolidated the absurd. Camus adapts the myth of *Don Juan* to his analysis as an example of human being opposed to the absurd man. Don Juan, as he is defined by Camus, is not an example of the absurd man, but rather his opposite, even though he contains in his figure some of the characteristics of the absurd. Don Juan, in Camus’s argumentation, does not think about “collecting” women, because collecting means being able to exist from and in the past. In contrast to this, the absurd man does not separate himself from the notion of time. Collecting is a way of

⁸ “There is but one moral code that the absurd man can accept, the one that is not separated from God: the one that is dictated. But it so happens that he lives outside that God. As for the others (I mean also immoralism), the absurd man sees nothing in them but justifications and he has nothing to justify. I start out here from the principle of his innocence” (Camus, 1988: 64).

narrowing the bond of the subject with the notion of time. Collecting creates an illusion of eternity which helps the absurd man destroy the anxiety of death and the end of Existence. This behaviour is exemplified by Clegg in his quest for collecting first butterflies, an important symbol of the soul in Greek philosophy, then photographs, which capture the moment and freeze time, and finally women, thus becoming himself an absurd Don Juan. In Camus's own words: "Il [Don Juan] trouverait normal d'être châtié. C'est la règle du jeu. Et c'est justement sa générosité que d'avoir accepté toute la règle du jeu. Mais il sait qu'il a raison et qu'il ne peut s'agir de châtement. Un destin n'est pas une punition" (p.103).⁹ Like Don Juan, Clegg considers his last acts as part of his destiny, nothing to be blamed for. That is, he still lives inside that insufferable innocence that allows his spirit to perpetrate any kind of action or misdeed, even though he knows that in many cases his acts are worth nothing. This is what Miranda implies when she calls him "Tantalus" (p. 100).

Tantalus and Sisyphus are both classical figures of Greek mythology who share a common feature: both were punished by the gods. Their punishment at Tartarus was to perform an endless, aimless task. Sisyphus was compelled to roll a stone up to the top of a slope, the stone always eventually escaping him at the top and rolling down again. In Camus's definition, Sisyphus became a useless worker in hell, "le travailleur inutile des enfers" (1942: 161). By contrast, Tantalus, a Phrygian king, was condemned for his crimes to remain standing forever, thirsty and hungry, chin deep in water, with fruit-laden branches hanging above his head: whenever he tried to drink or eat, the water and fruit receded out of reach. In this sense, Tantalus, as Sisyphus, symbolizes the aimless efforts human beings have to endure in order to reach an unreachable goal. This is the clearest symbol of Existentialist agony: the aimless nature of human life. Thus, by bonding Clegg to Tantalus, within this context of absurdity, the protagonist of *The Collector* becomes imbued with that feeling of aimless effort which makes him even more dangerous to Miranda. The lack of aim is what Miranda cannot understand from Clegg, who has nearly taken the quality of Absurd man to perfection.

Up to this point of the analysis, Camus's theoretical ideas have been taken from *Le mythe de Sisyphe*. However, the practical example of all these ideas is best portrayed in his novel *L'Étranger* (1942). Apart from the fact that both novels are first-person narrations in the form of a soliloquy, *L'Étranger* and *The Collector* in the kidnapper's narration share many points in common, mainly in the behaviour of their respective protagonists, Meursault and Frederick Clegg. The very first sentence in Camus's novel is a clear example of this fact: "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte"¹⁰ (1985: 9). The coldness and indifference with which this sentence is uttered is echoed by Clegg's own parallel statement of facts: "My father was killed driving [...] Uncle Dick died when I was fifteen" (p.11). Both Meursault and Clegg are constantly accused of their lack of feelings, what characterizes them as monsters. But it is not exactly their absence of remorse that perturbs the other members of society. Rather, they are dangerous because

⁹ "He [Don Juan] would consider it normal to be chastised. That is the rule of the game. And, indeed, it is typical of his nobility to have accepted all the rules of the game. Yet he knows he is right and that there can be no question of punishment. A fate is not a punishment" (Camus, 1988: 71).

¹⁰ "Mother died today" (Camus, 2000: 9).

of their inability to establish a solid boundary between moral and immoral acts. As Mahmoud Salami points out: “Whether in Miranda’s narrative or in his own, Clegg is constructed as a lost man with mixed desires and a split subjectivity” (1992: 54). Clegg is divided between what is moral for him and what is immoral for the rest. He contains in himself his own double (he is both Ferdinand and Caliban standing in a kind of complementary Jungian ego/shadow bond) but he acts within his own parameters of reality, his world of the Absurd, just as Meursault does not seem to understand why he is being judged and condemned to be beheaded in a public place. Being lonely heroes, they both feel strangers in a strange land, detached observers of reality.

This feeling of alienation is what makes Clegg feel like the *aristos* in the novel. He considers himself superior to the rest of mortals, but living in a wrong place. Thus, he remarks: “I never had anything to do with women [...] It’s some crude animal thing I was born without. (And I’m glad I was, if more people were like me, in my opinion, the world would be better)” (Fowles, 1998: 13). But the highest moment of this self-assurance appears at the end of the novel when he is already in search of “someone ordinary I could teach” (p.282). This confidence in his own absurd world is another source of evil in Clegg. Of course he does not evolve in the same sense as Miranda, who had she not died, “might have become something better, the kind of being humanity so desperately needs” (Fowles, 1980: 10). Clegg develops his absurd world to perfection, and, in this sense, he “evolves”. He becomes the perfect absurd man, dangerous to society and to the *aristos*-to-be Miranda. He will keep on collecting “death”: his butterflies, photographs and her doll-like women, all of them following a controlled pattern marked by the initial “M” of their names.

This ambiguity (both pleasure and disgust) of death is another reference mark of the Camusian absurd man. This is the reason why Meursault blames his mother when, at the end of her life, she found a new “boyfriend”. Meursault considers that his mother tried to start again her life in the asylum, looking for a new beginning, but he knows there is nothing after death. That is, he reacts against any kind of hope in a future existence after death. Thus, the absurd man lives imbued by a materialistic world of possession, and, at a certain point, without any kind of yearning for eternity. That is why everything is indifferent for Meursault in *L’Étranger* and why “for Clegg [...] going upwards doesn’t mean conforming to the criteria of the upper classes. [...] It simply means possessing, exerting power, and finally destroying the thing he cherishes, as he has to kill the butterflies to own them.” (Onega, 1989: 31-2). Death is the final halt in the road of living, nothing else is to be expected.

The absurd man, however, is dazzled by the brightness of other realities and beliefs, mainly by the holding out of hope — hope in a better existence in or after this life. This is portrayed in both novels through the image of the sun. The sun, as symbol of the Light, the utmost truth of Existence, oppresses both Meursault and Clegg in two different but interrelated ways. The blindness provoked in Meursault by the sunlight is for him the main cause of his crime — he shot a man to death —, but it also becomes an oppressive force during his mother’s funeral, even disturbing his feelings. The sun appears as a repressive force against which the absurd man tries to fight in a Sisyphus-like way. There is no escape from the sun, an element also used in Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days* (1961), where a suffocating sun oppresses Winnie with its blazing light. In the case of *The Collector*, there is even a certain reference to *L’Étranger*, or an uncanny

example of intertextual coincidence in the writing of a book, at the moment of Miranda's death: "The last words she spoke were about ten when she said (I think) 'the sun'" (p. 273). The funeral of Meursault's mother was also arranged for ten in the morning, and the presence of the oppressive sun completely dislocates the Camusian hero from his common reality. Meursault feels haunted by that supreme knowledge of Existence in the sun, whereas Clegg does not seem to understand its meaning. It is only Miranda who does when she recovers consciousness for an instant just before the moment of her death. At this point it may be said that Clegg has reached a complete separation from eternal life, now he is the absurd man who does not care about that symbol of supreme knowledge which haunts Existence. Clegg will keep on for ever in the futility of his aimless acts.

The issue of Freedom is one of the cornerstones of Existentialism. Freedom is highly affected by chance, and therefore, the existentialist struggle for life is a fight against a deterministic fate. Chance does not work as Determinism, chance affects life but does not control it. Existentialists are not determined to behave in a certain, already predetermined manner. They are freely affected by chance. Thus, another point that should be analysed is the relationship between Camus, Fowles and Shakespeare on this issue of Freedom and the common symbol of the tree. Let us centre the discussion on a reference in *L'Étranger*: "J'ai souvent pensé alors que si l'on m'avait fait vivre dans un tronc d'arbre sec, sans autre occupation que de regarder la fleur du ciel au dessus de ma tête, je m'y serais peu à peu habitué" (Camus, 1985: 120).¹¹ This fragment brings to mind an important scene in *The Tempest*, where Prospero is talking to Ariel about the latter's freedom:

Thou [Ariel], my slave, as thou report'st thyself, wast then her [Sycorax's] servant; and, for thou wast a spirit too delicate to act her earthly and abhorr'd commands, refusing her grand hests, she did confine thee [...] into a cloven pine; within which rift imprison'd thou didst painfully remain a dozen years. [...] It was mine [Prospero's] art, when I arriv'd and heard thee, that made gape the pine, and let thee out (1994:7, I. 2. 270-294).

The idea of being imprisoned in the trunk of a tree is what links both references. This is the painful feeling Miranda has in *The Collector*. She is imprisoned by the Calibanesque monster Clegg, a Sycorax-like figure, and just as Ariel asks Prospero for his freedom, Miranda negotiates her release with aimless Clegg. Miranda will even try to introduce Clegg into the world of language, echoing the role of Prospero with Caliban. But she is doomed to fail in her labour, for she is not a mature *aristos* yet. In Patricia Waugh's terms:

The concern with freedom in [Fowles's] case is, however, a consequence of the perceived analogy between plot in fiction and the 'plot' of God's creation, ideology or fate. It's a concern with the idea of being trapped within someone else's order. At the furthest metafictional extreme, this is to be trapped within language itself, within an arbitrary system of signification which appears to offer no means of escape (1990: 119).

¹¹ "I often thought in those days that even if I'd been made to live in a hollow tree trunk, with nothing to do but look up at the bit of sky overhead, I'd gradually have got used to it" (Camus, 2000: 75).

From this perspective, *The Collector* may be said to fictionalize the successful revenge of Caliban on Prospero. Caliban blames the magician for having taught him language, which he uses to curse Prospero. He, the inferior being, the son of a witch, and the deposed inheritor of Sycorax's island, has his belated revenge in *The Collector* by kidnapping Miranda, both Fowles's and Shakespeare's, and taking her to his absurd world from which no means of escape are offered. Miranda is trapped in the net of Clegg's absurd language, which she cannot understand and which leads her to a certain death.

Miranda fails to understand the Fowlesian concept of the "nemo": "I trace all these anxieties back to a supreme source of anguish: that of the nemo. [...] The nemo is a man's sense of his own futility and ephemerality; of his relativity, his comparativeness; of his virtual nothingness" (Fowles, 1980: 47-9). The "nemo" is the acceptance of the principle of being nobody, what one has to accept in order to escape the anguish of existence. It means the acceptance of the futility of actions and hope to dodge chance. Until the very end, Miranda retains hope in salvation, in a new life, without ever accepting her own tragedy. She cannot glance at the nemo and it is this that leads her to death. By contrast, Clegg does not care about this nemo, since it does not belong to the absurd world of materiality. Nothing leading to eternity is important for him, since he is an absurd man. And in order to become the perfect absurd man, he has to overcome suicide at the end. In Camus's terms, suicide is not any kind of solution to the question of Existence or its agony. It is just the end of existence and nothing else. It is this divorce between man and his life that constitutes the feeling of the absurd. As the critics have pointed out, Clegg's ideas are also affected by a romantic idealism of the courtly love type, he imagines himself as the knight errant dying with his princess. However, he easily overcomes this impulse of hope. Suicide is hope indeed, in the sense that there is a hope that after death all the agonizing problems of existence will be solved. Suicide presupposes a hope for another life and a hope for eternity and remembrance, as Clegg claims at the end of section three: "All I had to do was kill myself. [...] We would be buried together. Like Romeo and Juliet. [...] She [Miranda's corpse] was waiting for me down there. I would say we were in love, in the letter to the police. A suicide pact. It would be 'The End'" (pp. 276-77). However, Clegg overcomes this impulse, by finding Miranda's diary and realising the futility of suicide. It is at this point that he becomes the complete absurd man in Camusian terms. He has accepted the absurdity of existence and has "evolved" into a more materialist being. He is the perfect collector in the absurd world, and Marian ("another M! (p. 283)) will be his future "apprentice". Echoing Heraclitus's contention that: "The beginning and the end are shared in the circumference of a circle" (Kahn, 1979: 75), at the end of the novel, Clegg is left trapped "within the maddening vicious circle of [his] own mental world" (Onega, 1996: 49).

In conclusion, *The Collector* is not only an allegorical representation of the power struggle between the Few and the Many, but also a practical example of the evil nature of Camus's absurd man, stemming from his absurd innocence. Clegg, like Meursault, is an isolated (anti)hero who struggles against his passions in an existence of the Absurd. A Tantalus-like figure, the collector's aimless efforts are the fruit of chance. He is a stranger in a strange land of Existence provoking the nausea (in Sartre's terms, 1980) of Miranda (and the reader). His is not the evolution to perfection of knowledge of the

nemo, but rather a progressive development into utter absurdity and Sartrean bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). However, as Camus clearly pointed out, there is not a single idea which explains everything, but an infinity of essences which gives sense to an infinity of objects. Therefore, this reading of *The Collector* must, inevitably, remain open. The only possible certainty that one has to acknowledge is the power of this novel to adapt Camusian existentialism into a literary masterpiece.

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