



Absurdity: Art and Reality

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Absurdity is at the core of much current philosophical and literary discussion. Life is absurd; man is absurd; society is absurd; religion is absurd. On and on goes the litany of the absurd. Nothing seems to fall outside the sphere of its skepticism, not even God—if He exists.

Indeed, most crucial to this matter is the problem of the existence of God. God's existence or non-existence ultimately determines the background against which the human condition is to be viewed. For those who deny God's existence, the universe becomes disordered, devoid of all meaning, in which man makes his own habitable world by his unique existential choice. This choice is often hidden in the

lower level of consciousness, and before one can become truly alive one must become aware of oneself as an "I", an existential subject, who must bear alone the responsibility of his own situation.

For those who affirm God's existence, the universe is revealed as full of grace and order, beautiful and meaningful, where man by his consciousness makes his way back to his Creator. The meaning and value of all comes from God Who decrees that man—as a human person and creature of God—by his existential choice freely accept or reject Him explicitly or implicitly in all things. Here man's responsibility for his actions does not rest entirely on his own determining or non-determining of meanings and values as is the case in the atheistic position. Rather, it rests on man's free choice to conform or not to his own knowledge of the meanings and values predetermined by God.

Between these two positions we find those men who have neither denied nor affirmed God's existence. Theirs is the agony of indecision, the agony of freedom. They have discovered the existential "I", but the dreadful freedom to choose overawes them. Clearly conscious of their necessity to choose their own individual worlds, they suffer a sense of absurdity and often despair. What values are they to choose? Subjective values are seen as inauthentic, and objective ones as mere illusions.

The first position, or atheistic humanism, finds its expression in such men as Sartre and Camus. Christian humanism, the second position, has been epitomized in such men as Kierkegaard and Marcel. The perplexed middle includes many of the contemporary artists. Our approach to the absurd will be through this uncommitted position. In particular we shall see how this position finds expression in the theatre—The Theatre of the Absurd. Our procedure will be to determine whether or not the theatrical expression of the absurd is a valid art form and then to form a judgment as to the truth of the reality it presents. Hence, the question we pose is this: Is theatrical absurdity merely an artificial device or is it also a true picture of reality?

Theatre of the Absurd

The Theatre of the Absurd is not a self-declared or self-asserted movement or school. Rather, it is a term applied to a theatre genre

much as the term Existentialism is applied to a segment of philosophic thought. What we find are individual writers, each isolated in his own private microcosm. The note of commonness lies in that "their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of an important segment of their contemporaries in the Western world."¹

It represents a prominent attitude of our times—the attitude of the perplexed middle—an attitude born of the general denigration of certain and unshakeable basic assumptions of former ages, the gradual decline of religious faith in God which was superceded by the religious faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian movements. Finally even these false gods were washed away in the wake of two world wars, leaving a world of fragmented creeds behind.

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes Absurdity.²

In these words of Camus we see the birth of the epoch of man's dethronement. He is dashed into an abyss of anguish from which he struggles to escape in a world of his own making "or else in suicide." The abyss is his own soul stripped of illusions—humbled and abandoned to the absurd, to that which is devoid of purpose. Ionesco describes this state as follows: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions became senseless, absurd, useless."³

This sense of anguish over the absurdity of the human condition is the common theme of the plays of Samuel Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, and the like. It is important to distinguish here between the dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd and the drama-

¹ Martin Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd* (New York, Anchor Books, 1961), p. xciii. The term "Theatre of the Absurd" was first coined by Esslin.

² Albert Camus. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris, Gallimard, 1942), p. 18.

³ Eugene Ionesco, "Dans les Armes de la Ville," *Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault*, Paris, No. 20, October 1957.

tists of Existential theatre. The former are typified by those just mentioned and the latter are seen in the persons of Giraudoux, Anouilh, Sartre, and Camus, whose theme is marked by a similar sense of the meaninglessness of human life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose. It would be well to recall our opening description of positions, for in that cleavage, namely the denial of God by the atheistic humanists and the indecision of the non-committed, we find the basis for the difference between the two theatres. The absurdists consider the theatre as an instrument to express the individual's obsessions, nightmares, and anxiety, be they the author's own personal ones or those of another. The existentialists see the theatre as an instrument of political ideology and collective social action. On this basis, we can classify the absurdist dramatists as the perplexed middle and the existentialists as the atheistic humanists. This is not to say that there are not some absurdists who are atheists or that there are no perplexed existentialists. Ultimately the man and his work objectively viewed will reveal his condition and creed. Our point is that a committed philosopher will see the theatre as a vehicle for exposing his intellectual thought, while a perplexed, sensitive artist will see the theatre as a battle ground upon which to wage war against himself and his environment and thus expose the secrets of his heart. Therefore, both will differ in their approach to the same subject matter.

The existentialist presents absurdity in the grand tradition of highly lucid and logically constructed rhetoric, while the absurdist communicates the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational constructs and discursive reasoning. Martin Esslin comments that "while Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which they are expressed."⁴ Expanding this thought with reference to Existentialist methodology, he adds:

If Camus argues that in our disillusioned age the world has to make sense, he does so in the elegantly rationalistic and discursive style of an eighteenth-century moralist, in well-constructed and polished plays. If Sartre argues that existence comes before essence and that human personality can be reduced to pure potentiality and the freedom to

⁴ Esslin. *op. cit.*, p. xx.

choose itself anew at any moment, he presents his ideas in plays based on brilliantly drawn characters who remain wholly consistent and thus reflect the old convention that each human being has a core of immutable, unchanging essence . . . ⁵

There are several noteworthy insights in this comment. First of all, the definiteness of purpose and style reveals adherence to a precise ideology. Furthermore, the consistency of the character development even within the context of an absurd situation not only implies that solutions can be found through reason, as Esslin indicates, but it bespeaks a set of first principles, a metaphysics of sorts. Hence, Ionesco's description of the absurd as man's estrangement from his metaphysical, religious, and transcendental roots is not fully applicable to these men; for although they deny the transcendental roots of former ages, they do form their own brand of transcendence. The point to underline, abstracting from the correctness of their metaphysics, is that these men have passed their dark night of the soul, so to speak, and are probing for answers under the light of intellect.

In diametric opposition, we find the absurdists. They are still in the realm of psyche. They cannot accept the deductions of those who talk about absurdity but offer no real solutions; for the basis of their deductions is not an absolute, transcendent God but rather a relative god dependent on the whim of man's own making, subject to his conscious factivity. In other words, they see in the atheistic humanist a man who replaces illusions of a former era with a new set of illusions: the illusions created by an intellect accepting the absurd in a sort of "who cares" attitude in which man, having rejected self-destruction as an alternative, makes the best of things.

The absurdists reject those affirming God's existence on the same grounds but for a different reason. The illusion which they here reject is the false religious pretense that all is sweetness, gentility, comfort, and accommodation. The absurdists see in this a beguiled believer who has happily given up the option of the atheistic humanist for a false though safe alternative. They see a man whose illusion is a myth created to escape the hardships of free decision and live a life of pretense, avoiding the need to explain the presence of the absurdity which shames his God.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Both of these rejections accent the non-committal character of the absurdists. The reason for this seems to be their reluctance to be burned by illusions after having been scarred once before. Moreover, this explains the mockery of religion and the defamation of reason often found in their plays, inasmuch as either of these illusions is a source of contempt for them.

What the absurdists are trying to do is overcome and resolve their inner contradictions by instinct and intuition rather than by consciously calculated effort. Hence they merely present the absurdity of the human condition as they see it, as they feel it, as they know it in terms of concrete stage images. Their way is the way of a poet and not of a philosopher. It is the difference between the way a mystic approaches God and the way a theologian approaches Him. It is the difference between theory and experience. Therefore, over and above the difference in attitude toward content, it is precisely the form of expression which separates the Theatre of the Absurd from that of the Existentialist theatre.

Art and Reality

Historically viewed in the theatrical context, the Theatre of the Absurd or avant-garde movement is considered to be a reaction against the realistic movement of the late 19th century, which in turn was a reaction against its predecessor romanticism. From what we have seen we should not be surprised at reaction against realism, since to the absurdists realism is an illusion based upon an illusory reality. Oddly enough, realism in its day was trying to destroy the illusion of romanticism with "truth." Today the absurdist uses "theatricality," that is, reality-dissolving extravagance, to destroy the illusion of realism. In other words, the absurdist doesn't want you to forget that you are in the theatre watching a play, while the realist wants you to be oblivious to it to the point of feeling as though you were watching life.

As the battle raged in the theatrical world, the critics and audiences were equally at odds. It is beyond our intent to enter into this debate. We shall merely see whether the theatrical art form of the absurdist fulfills the most basic functions of art, namely, imitation and communication.

"A culture with its dominant philosophy, its religious experience,

its artistic revelations, is man's way of becoming himself, thus revealing in the fluid present what he thinks he is."⁶ This insight of Fr. Paul Haas, O.P., is certainly applicable to the artist of the absurd. These men are commenting on the culture they encounter and in the process they effect a kind of soul-searching of man: they prod him, they challenge him, they criticize him, they ask him to be honest with himself, they wait for him to tell who he really thinks he is. In short, they have placed the human nature of man on the operating table and are checking the content.

With this in mind, the celebrated principle "art imitates nature" can be applied readily to the Theatre of the Absurd. As Fr. Haas observes:

the nature which art is supposed to imitate is most significantly man's own nature and not the natures of less than human phenomena. When art reveals what man is to himself, art is fulfilling its role in society in the best tradition. If men are at times uncertain of their own rationality (nothing new at all), it is not the fault of art to so reveal man, for man is rarely if ever more than a somewhat rational animal.⁷

Thus the human nature the absurdist is imitating is a really existing thing—it is his own psyche, and that of those like him who are not sure of their reason or their faith. In such a state of mind a man can no longer be certain that he knows what he knows or whether he just believes he knows what he knows. An example is provided in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Everything hinges on Godot's coming, but it simply cannot be determined whether or not Godot exists. When an effort is made to pin down who Godot is or what he is like, the two boys who testify to his existence give contradictory accounts. Moreover, the tramp who made the appointment with him cannot remember where or when it was, though he believes it happened.

Another theme finding a basis in reality is the artist's conviction that modern man cannot look to his society to teach him a worthy existence. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* relates what happens when, absurdly enough, people begin turning into rhinoceroses. At the end of the play there are two surviving humans in a world of rhinoceroses. One

⁶ William Paul Haas, O.P. *The Contemporary Arts* (Washington, Thomist Press, 1965), p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

of the two freely decides to join them. This is what adjustment to reality means. This voluntary abandonment of humanity is what society skillfully teaches its members, and that is how the artist translated it into his language.

Communication value in art should not be measured by numbers but rather in intensity. Language in the theatre is dramatic activity which communicates an immediate, personal apprehension of truth, of the *feel* of truth, about a thing, or a person, or a situation—which uniquely brings into play by mediation of the imagination the senses, the emotions, and the intellect.

To *feel* the truth is at the heart of the experience, because in feeling something real we are led to think about it. Thus, for example, in *Rhinoceros* when the first beastman gallops through the town, the playgoer is a little amused or even annoyed that anyone could expect him to take the notion seriously. But as the play progresses, as a man changes into a rhinoceros on stage, the idea ceases to be ridiculous but even becomes deadly serious.

Beckett's *Act Without Words* is a uniquely thoughtful yet emotive way of portraying the sense of meaninglessness. An actor is thrown on the stage at the beginning. Various objects come down to him from above that he would like to have, including a pitcher of water which is always withdrawn from his reach. This is enacted again and again, intermittently announced by the sound of a whistle and the lowering of other objects. Finally all things are removed one by one, until there is nothing left but the sound of the whistle and the man. Total despair? Not necessarily. In keeping with their frame of mind, the man represents those stripped of illusions who must now face themselves honestly and make a decision. In this we see the beauty of art, in that it does not make the decision itself; it leaves the solution up to man, to the man in the audience.

These instances exemplify how the absurdists do use a legitimate art form which is both imitative and communicative of nature. Whether or not one personally likes this form of art is another question. The same holds true for content, especially with regard to morality, with regard to personal agreement or disagreement in the areas of philosophy and theology and the like. These elements fall outside the realm of art form as such; they belong to the purview of the prudent man as objects of discernment. A caution to be

urged is that when one such an area is scrutinized, the scrutiny should be conducted within the immediate context of the work of art itself and not on what the viewer *supposes* the author says. Hence, a thorough knowledge of the work is a presupposition to the prudent judgment.

The pleasure derived from the art form comes from the feel of the truth communicated—the internal *is-ness* of an outcast, of a situation of bewilderment, of the perplexed soul of a man not yet committed. This pleasure is not the one that comes from discursive reasoning which satiates the intellect alone; it comes from the discourse of art which communicates a phenomenological totality to the whole man. The message communicated may not please a man, for it may remind him of his inadequacy and his need to come to a decision, but by his very displeasure he has been pleased in the artistic sense of having felt the truth of the art form; he has experienced a reality of human nature in the “theatricality” of the absurd.

The Church and The Absurd

The artist has in his power the ability to help man solve his problems. He does this not by furnishing emasculating pat answers but by giving a sense of the tragedy and the sublimity of human destiny. This makes man's personal anxieties seem small, thus placing them in a new setting, a new proportion, and freeing man to choose for himself. Pope Paul VI, well aware of this greatness possessed by the artist, tells him:

We need you. Our ministry needs your collaboration. This is so because, as you know, our ministry is that of preaching and of making accessible and understandable, and even stirring, the world of the spirit, the invisible world of God, the ineffable. And in this operation of expressing the invisible world in accessible, intelligible formulae, you are the masters. It is your *métier* and your art is precisely that of snatching its treasures from the world of the spirit and clothing them in words, colors and accessible forms.⁸

Art's tongue does not form the dry sounds of logic and mathematics; it echoes the mellow notes of a heart. Its warm, resonant

⁸ *Allocation of Pope Paul VI to Italian Artists, May 7, 1964 (NCWC Translation).*

tones herald the treasures of the world which are inaccessible to the faculties of sense and our immediate perception; and, "in the very act of making the world of the spirit accessible and comprehensible," Paul reminds the artist, "you preserve the ineffability of such a world, its transcendence, its aura of mystery, its necessity to be grasped with ease and at the same time with effort." The power of art to accomplish such a task comes from the artist's sensitivity, his capacity of perceiving, and at the same time feeling "that which could not be captured or expressed through thought."

Today this potentiality of art has reached an impasse. It is not a static impasse but one of turbulence in which man is trying to come to grips with himself and his surroundings. Art is repulsed both by the philosophic existentialist who claims that integrity means a refusal to sacrifice one's freedom in the face of absurdity, and by the fairy-tale religionist who has sublimated his fear of absurdity in a false religion which shields him from his real self, his real world—and from a real faith.

True religion and true faith confer a measure of peace of mind, but only by confronting and accepting God's decrees for existence, not by avoiding them. This is the truth of Christianity that will free art's potentiality. This is the Godot for whom it is waiting.

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