

THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD:

ITS THEMES AND FORM

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by

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PREFACE

Contemporary dramatic literature is often discussed with the aid of descriptive terms ending in "ism." Anthologies frequently arrange plays under such categories as expressionism, surrealism, realism, and naturalism. Critics use these designations to praise and to condemn, to denote style and to suggest content, to describe a consistent tone in an author's entire oeuvre and to dissect diverse tendencies within a single play. Such labels should never be pasted to a play or cemented even to a single scene, since they may thus stifle the creative imagination of the director, actor, or designer, discourage thorough analysis by the thoughtful viewer or reader, and distort the complex impact of the work by suppressing whatever subtleties may seem in conflict with the label. At their worst, these terms confine further investigation of a work of art, or even tempt the critic into a ludicrous attempt to squeeze and squash a rounded play into a square pigeon-hole. But, at their best, such terms help to elucidate theme and illuminate style.

Recently the theatre public's attention has been called to a group of avant-garde plays whose philosophical propensities and dramatic conventions have been subsumed under the title "theatre of the absurd." This label describes the profoundly pessimistic world view of playwrights whose work is frequently hilarious theatre, but who appear to despair at the futility and irrationality of life and the inevitability of death. Using the term theatre of the absurd, critics have clarified the content of many a complex avant-garde play. Martin Esslin has written a virtual encyclopedia of the movement.

Esslin's The Theatre of the Absurd provides the puzzled viewer or reader with sensitive analyses of numerous plays, yet neither Esslin nor the author of any of the subsequent books and articles on this movement has detailed the thematic material which the dramatists of the absurd present. Studies continue to concentrate on individual plays or on a few scattered themes, with the result that the term absurdist is applied indiscriminately to quite a motley crew. Arguments rage as to whether this play or that is absurdist, or, unfortunately, often simply "absurd."

Although not usually called absurdism, the designation "theatre of the absurd" is prone to the same kinds of abuses as are encountered in the use of "isms." Without a catalogue of thematic material, the term means anything and therefore nothing. It is too broad. On the other hand, individual critics brand the label on any wriggling, elusive play, oversimplifying it, confining it in a neat dramatic straight-jacket. The term then is too narrow. Subtleties are lost.

A catalogue of themes common to the absurdist playwrights may permit a judicious use of the label, eliminating certain plays which obviously should not be characterized as primarily absurdist, allowing examination of the formal characteristics of the particularly absurdist plays, and suggesting comparisons with various other works of dramatic literature. This study therefore attempts a detailed examination of the content of the theatre of the absurd, contrasts this content with the themes of three other playwrights sometimes associated with the absurd, and provides a briefer discussion of the formal expression of absurdist themes.

Certain plays by nine British, continental, and American playwrights will be referred to as absurdist. The selection is somewhat arbitrary and a somewhat different group of plays might have been chosen. The original group considered was larger, but only the plays finally selected seem to have a sufficient degree of thematic and stylistic similarity to warrant inclusion.

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BOOK I: THEMES

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

Useful in abstracting a definition of the theatre of the absurd are the plays of Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, N. F. Simpson, Robert Pinget, and Arrabal, as well as certain plays by Arthur Adamov, Arthur Kopit, and Edward Albee. Many critics have discerned in plays by these dramatists a vision of a world which is absurd; that is, not ridiculous or ludicrous or laughable, but metaphysically futile, purposeless, meaningless, irrational. As described by Ionesco, "All human behavior tells of absurdity and all history of absolute futility..."¹

The absurd in some guise hounds every absurdist character. Not a one can realistically hope to evade the absurd. Some do try to escape. Ionesco's Jack, for example, found life impossible at birth, but his search for an escape route has encountered only doors that are boarded and stairs that are gone. Men cannot exit to escape, but the absurd can and does enter, in Pinter's A Slight Ache, for instance, invading a wealthy man's life in his own home on a beautiful day, disrupting his marriage, evicting him; there is no escape from the force accompanying that Matchseller. There is no escape, either, in Ionesco's Victims of Duty, from the Detective, who, though he does not believe in the absurd, embodies it. Choubert's mundane life is disrupted, and he awakens to a new vision of the world:

¹"My Critics and I," Notes and Counter Notes, tr. Donald Watson (New York, 1964), p. 163.

Shsdes waking to life...
 ...nostalgia, shreds and fragments of a
 universe...A yawning pit...
 Resign myself...resign myself...The
 light is dark...the stars are dim...I'm
 suffering from an unknown disesse...
 My face is wet with tesrs. Where has
 beauty gone? And goodness? And love?
 I've lost my memory...
 My toys...in pieces...My toys are
 broken...The toys I had as a child...
 I sm old...I am old...²

He is old, and age and subsequent death are one facet of the ab-
 surd, one means of rendering life hopeless. The Berenger of The Killer
 remarks that hope is no longer a French word. His hopes die with Dany,
 the girl he loves. In Beckett's Happy Days, Willie's aspirations are
 mocked by his age. Twice each he reads from the paper "Opening for
 smart youth" and "Wanted bright boy."³ He is, like the hog he describes,
 "Castrated male swine...Reared for slaughter." (p. 47)

This life without hope is also life without meaning. In Pinget's
Dead Letter the Clerk gropes for meaning, but the curtain falls on his
 pathetic "What matters is...Whst matters...What matters..."⁴ The same
 dramatist's Clope wishes for the good old days when "you had a glimmer
 of whst it wss all about..."⁵ There is no longer even s glimmer of

²Three Plays, tr. Donald Watson (New York, 1958), pp. 141-142.
 All subsequent quotations from Victims of Duty will be from this edition.

³(New York, 1961), pp. 16 & 48, 17 & 48. All subsequent quotations
 from Happy Dsys will be from this edition.

⁴tr. Barbara Bray, Plays: Volume I (London, 1963), p. 131. All
 subsequent quotations from Dead Letter will be from this edition.

⁵Robert Pinget, "Clope," Plays, I, p. 22. All subsequent quotes-
 tions from this play will be from this edition.

meaning discernible and Clope's nostalgia is termed reactionary by his friend Flan, who prefers eating to understanding. And Ionesco explains that his plays reflect a world "emptied of meaning...Human beings saturated in meaninglessness."⁶ Such saturation is perhaps most acute in The Chairs, in which objects, a clutter of chairs, fill the void and a mute voices the meaning of life.

Beckett's tramps likewise fill their lives with pointless activity involving objects; they put on shoes, take off hats, pick up bags--which are filled with sand--and assume it all means something because they are waiting for Godot. The three lost souls of Play, immured in urns, comfort themselves with the thought that they understand their lives and deaths, but each, knowing only a fragment of the picture, arrives at a surmise hopelessly incorrect. Their pasts were aimless, their ends purposeless, and their present lives are a cruel joke, pierced by a probing, inquisitive light which elicits from each unjustified hopes and those ludicrous attempts to make sense of the senseless. Of all Beckett's creations only the bitter participants in Endgame can laugh at the joke that their lives might "mean something."⁷

Adamov's and Arrabal's characters grossly distort values in the attempt to impose meaning on the void. Sex, sadism, pedantry and games become ends for these drifters. Simpson's Aunt Mildred of One Way Pendulum seeks solace in a more innocuous way. She pursues senile

⁶"The Chairs: Text for the Program of the Theatre du Nouveau Lancry," Notes and..., p. 186.

⁷(New York, 1958), p. 33. All subsequent quotations from Endgame will be from this edition.

destinations--"By rail to outer space!"⁸--and from these excursions derives a fleeting sense of purpose, one lost as soon as the temporary goal is "reached."

Whatever the kind of effort to find meaning in life, the attempt is futile. Life is repeatedly depicted as hopeless, meaningless, and purposeless, and no kind of effort successfully alters these conditions. In fact, the execution of any meaningful action is consistently rendered either impossible or futile. A major theme in absurdist plays, this is not, however, the only aspect of the absurd depicted. Other specific themes, which together suggest a hopeless, meaningless, and purposeless universe, include mortality, uncertainty, vitiated values, conformity, the instability of the personality, non-communication, isolation, and emotional atrophy.

Several of these themes are usually dramatized in a single play, and the same dramatic action may simultaneously convey more than one facet of the absurd. Thematic analysis is facilitated by a separate examination of each theme, but the dramatization of only one of these themes in an entire play would suggest that the play is not to any great degree absurdist.

⁸(New York, 1960), p. 19. All subsequent quotations from One Way Pendulum will be from this edition.

PART I: AN ANALYSIS OF ABSURDIST THEMES

THE INABILITY TO ACT AND THE FUTILITY OF ACTION

In play after play man's limitations are revealed in his inability to act. Whether impossible or interminable, man's attempts to act are frustrated in plays by every dramatist here under consideration.

The futility of action is a favorite theme of Samuel Beckett. Waiting for Godot is a parable on a paradox. Twice each, Didi and Gogo assert "Nothing to be done,"¹ and Gogo suggests "Don't let's do anything. It's safer." (p. 12A) Yet these early admonitions are not heeded. Didi, the man of action, and Gogo, the dreamer who would love to swim in the Dead Sea, must attempt action, must assault the impossible dream, not with romantic ardor, but with stinking breath and stinking feet and endless pain. Doomed forever to fail in their attempts, they are likewise doomed forever to try. Learning nothing, pitiful and ridiculous, they take up the task again, caught in the interminable act of waiting for Godot. They will always wait for him, and, lest the audience doubt, Beckett makes it clear that they have always waited; even before the first act Godot's boy has come to prolong the wait. Like Didi's round about the dog killed in the kitchen whose tomb tells about the dog killed in the kitchen whose tomb tells about the dog killed, the action is circular, admitting no beginning and no end.

¹(New York, 1954), pp. 7A, 8A, 8B, 14B. All subsequent quotations from Waiting for Godot will be from this edition.

Just as life will always be thus, unfulfilled and interminable, so will the possibility of other action always be precluded, alike for the passive tramps and the harried master and slave. All the flurry of activity in which Pozzo and Lucky engage hurries them on only to the decrepitude of old age. Pozzo cannot sell Lucky. Lucky cannot think--or, finally, speak. Gogo can sleep and Didi can urinate only with the greatest pain. Eight times the suggestion "Let's go," is rejected because "we're waiting for Godot." Seventeen times the tramps say "I'm going," or "Let's go," or "Shall we go," only to remain, without explanation, motionless. The choice to act results in inaction.

Beckett dramatizes the futility or impossibility of action repeatedly. The sole character in Act without Words I strives for unattainable comforts--a drink of water or a noose with which to end the striving--but every effort is cleverly thwarted by unseen, omnipotent forces, torturing by tantalizing the poor dupe, whose only triumph is the lethargy into which he finally retreats and in which he can ignore his tormentors. Inaction is the refuge of man in an absurd universe.

Other Beckett characters cannot withdraw from the struggle, cannot take refuge in inaction, but likewise cannot achieve the fulfillment of an aim. Those in Cascando perform their duties, the Opener methodically opening and closing and refusing to protest any more, the Voice never approaching the end of the story-telling which he still hopes to conclude. Henry in Embers cannot complete his stories, Hamm and Clov cannot end their endgame, and the threesome in Play, while they have finished their lives, cannot complete their deaths, nor can they cease fighting with the light and struggling to find some meaning in their lives. Also

caught in a futile, repetitive pattern is Winnie, who, in Happy Days, consumes those days in endless, aimless busy work, polishing her toothbrush handle and her glasses while she has the use of her hands and polishing her platitudes when she is dependent upon her tongue alone. Since Winnie is immured in the earth, she cannot depart of her own free will. Her only exit is into the bowels of the earth, which relentlessly sucks its victim into the complete immobility of the grave. Winnie cannot even dispose of her possessions; she throws away her burned parasol and breaks her mirror, but the restoration of these items intact each morning reveals the volitional impotence undercutting Winnie's attempts.

Israel Shenker quotes Beckett, who contrasts his characters to those of Kafka. "The Kafka hero has a coherence of purpose...My people seem to be falling to bits."² Beckett goes on to cite impotence as his theme, the impotence evident in each of his plays as the characters pursue their purposeless lives. Nowhere is this futility any more evident than in Krapp's Last Tape. Old Krapp, whose proudest accomplishments are sleeping with an old whore and selling seventeen copies of his book, "eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas,"³ listens to the Krapp of thirty years before speak of the fire within him, but the fire has consumed itself and him, and the ashes are neither cleaner than the former man nor more useful as fertilizer.

²"Moody Man of Letters: A Portrait of Samuel Beckett, Author of the Puzzling 'Waiting for Godot,'" New York Times (May 6, 1956), section 2, p. 1.

³Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces (New York, 1960), p. 25. All subsequent quotations from this play will be from this edition.

Adamov's absurdist plays emphasize the futility or impossibility of action. In Professor Taranne and Ping-Pong, two which have seen English language publication and production, for example, Adamov depicts a Professor Taranne whose career and moral character are casually destroyed despite his most energetic efforts to the contrary, and a pair of men whose lives and professions are vitiated by fanatic addiction to games. Whether pinball or ping-pong or the game of life, aimless activity according to arbitrary rules drains human resources, deflecting attention from loving and living to games which devour time and can produce only death.

Kopit observes the futility of human endeavor in three of his plays. In Chamber Music the female inmates of the asylum want to vanquish the men, but they lose track of their plan and succeed only in a pointless murder of one of their own number. Escape is likewise impossible and only lamentation is left the women: "I'm Amelia Earhart and I want to get the hell out."⁴ Jonathan in Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad can also only feel sad. He has built a telescope that can see for miles only to discover that there is nothing to see. Impotence is particularly important in The Day the Whores Came out to Play Tennis. At the Cherry Valley Country Club, in a room called "the Nursery," Max, dubbed Old Gayve, gambles away his money, each detail evoking Chekovian futility. The members of the country club are helpless victims unable to resist the aggression of

⁴The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis and Other Plays (New York, 1965), p. 12. All subsequent quotations from Chamber Music will be from this edition.

the whores, who bombard them with tennis balls and fart in their faces with impunity.

Robert Pinget's characters, like those of Beckett, are bored and consume their lives in activity rather than effective action. King Architruc invents disguises and games and considers drinking a Pernod or moving the furniture, but his minister Baga assures him that he actually can change nothing. Even a king thus dabbles without really doing. In Clope, Pinget's setting is a railway station and the goal of all is departure. Those who come to hear their fortunes want to be told of an impending journey, but Clope must admit that nothing will ever happen to them. Although even the grammar book concerns itself with man's yen to travel, the actual act of departure usually is prevented by the characters' confusing the stations or postponing the journey or because the mere fruitless wishing is not implemented with effort.

The entire concern of N. F. Simpson's Oh is the impossibility of acting. Graham is attempting to paint a portrait of Colonel Padlock. The harder Graham works the less headway he makes because he indulges in unnecessary and time consuming subsidiary activities. He has constructed his own easel, grown his own hemp and woven this into a canvas, felled the timber for his handle and plucked the camel hairs for his brush, and collected his own pigments. Now at the task of achieving the proper distance, Graham is having his subject travel backwards around the world. Doubtless when the artist and model are back to back, Graham will endeavor to move the sun in order to obtain the proper illumination. In The Hole Simpson likewise dramatizes the inability to act. The possibility of acting is precluded by the assertion of mutually exclusive

possibilities. For example, one character simultaneously defends and denounces capital punishment, making any constructive action in behalf of either opinion impossible. Intentions to act are vehemently expressed by Endo and Soma, but the result of the former's declarations is much frantic running to no purpose, and the latter essentially marks time in one position by taking alternate single steps to the north, the south, the east, and the west.

Some of Harold Pinter's characters fail to achieve their goals. Nothing concrete impedes the progress of the three men in The Caretaker; nevertheless, Davies never gets those papers down in Sidcup, Aston never starts that shed out back, and Mick never does more than talk about those improvements he will make in his property. Stanley in The Birthday Party likewise indulges in idle dreams, disliking his present location and proposing a change but never attempting to realize his plans. Even the act of dreary existence with Meg is rendered impossible by the insuperable obstacle of Goldberg and McCann.

Albee's Grandma can break out of the cage that is The American Dream, but Daddy cannot get the Johnny fixed and Mommy returns a hat and then accepts the same hat as an "exchange." These efforts to obtain satisfaction are not their only failures. They cannot even find Grandma's room or get Mrs. Barker a drink of water. The simplest act becomes impossible. Daddy is sexually impotent and vicious Mommy is no more fertile or effective.

The revolt against authority of Arrabal's childish characters is a mere gesture, doomed to failure. Other kinds of efforts are just as futile, whether that of a son to prevent the murder of his father or

that of an athlete to break a track record when he is already faint from hours of uninterrupted running. Just as Waiting for Godot is a parable of endless waiting, Fando and Lis is a parable of incessant but fruitless activity. Like a squirrel in a cage, Fando runs and runs, but he never gets to Tsr, always returning instead to his starting point.

Eugène Ionesco's characters do not always try to accomplish a goal, but those who do make the attempt frequently fail. In The Chairs the Old Woman's constant refrain is on the positions the Old Man might have held, the accomplishments that might have been his. The Old Man calls himself "the lightning rod of catastrophes," complaining to the emperor

I wanted to go in for sports...for mountain climbing...they pulled my feet and made me slip...I wanted to climb stairways, they rotted the steps...I fell down...I wanted to travel, they refused me a passport...I wanted to cross the river, they burnt my bridges...I wanted to cross the Pyrenees, and there were no more Pyrenees.⁵

But in spite of his disappointments the Old Man has not learned to stop hoping. He dies perfectly confident that his message will be delivered to an enthusiastic reception and his fame at last will be certain.

But hope for the success of any plan is meager in Ionesco's universe. In Victims of Duty Choubert responds to a variety of ridiculous stimuli all designed to force him to find Mallot with a "t" or Mallod with a "d." Nothing works. One effort, for example, is undermined by his wife. Madeleine directs the ascending Choubert with alternate

⁵Four Plays, tr. Donald M. Allen (New York, 1958), p. 151. All subsequent quotations from The Chairs will be from this edition.

commands to go "Up higher. Down lower. Up higher." (p. 148) And his wife's attempts to please the Detective are no more effective. She expends enormous energy and time in the preparation of a cup of coffee, but can produce only tea.

No day seems to be Amédée's day either. In Amédée or How to Get Rid of It, the title character is a tired, timid, abject failure. Like Beckett's tramps, he sings--or moans--a refrain of "There's nothing to be done, nothing."⁶ Amédée is a playwright so weary that in fifteen years he has written only two lines of his play. Again like Gogo and Didi, his determination to act is disconnected from his capacity to do so. "I'll go and do it," he says. Then "He sits quite still." (p. 53) He apparently cannot write because of worry over a bothersome corpse which, expanding by geometric progression, is rapidly dispossessing him of his apartment. For years Amédée has been unable to remove the body. When he finally appears to succeed in his attempt at action, actually dragging the corpse out through the window, he uproots his home, his marriage, and his life. He then cannot transport the body to the river, but is wafted off into the blue. Amédée's attempt "to get rid of it" is essentially a failure, for "it" gets rid of him.

Ionesco's various Berenger characters also encounter obstacles. One runs up against a whole herd of bellowing rhinoceri. This Berenger cannot persuade people to act against the initial menace, cannot prevent his friends from joining the ranks of the enemy, and cannot even peacefully

⁶Three Plays, p. 28. All subsequent quotations from Amédée will be from this edition.

coexist with the trumpeting pachyderms. When every other form of rebellion proves futile, Berenger declares that he will not capitulate. Perhaps he may succeed in this last determination, but the entire speech preceding his final militant line suggests that this attempt too must fail. He wishes he were a rhinoceros, admiring the hide and the horns, imitating the trumpeting. There is every indication that he would change if he could, but cannot manage the transformation at that moment. Perhaps even the act of submission, because it is an act, is denied him.

The absurd is still more evident in the lives of Berenger, the foe of the Killer, and Berenger the King. Each fails in his attempt to conquer death. In The Killer Berenger thinks he is "doing something,"⁷ but even his positive evidence against the Killer cannot put the menace behind bars. Berenger's attempts are rendered ineffectual by universal indifference and inefficiency, especially that of the police, who snarl traffic with chaotic contradictory directions similar to those in Simpson's The Hole. Overcoming these obstructions, Berenger does at last confront his adversary, but the absurd in the form of death renders impotent every bribe, every argument, and even a weapon for self defense.

Death is also triumphant in Exit the King. No monarch can control his kingdom indefinitely, nor defend it from the encroachments of the absurd. King Berenger's subjects suddenly age from twenty-five to eighty years in a mere two days. Mars and Saturn collide; snow falls on a failing Sun; the Milky Way curdles. Berenger loses his power over the elements,

⁷The Killer and Other Plays, tr. Donald Watson (New York, 1960), p. 96. All subsequent quotations from The Killer will be from this edition.

his subjects, and finally his own body. Struggle is futile, and death claims its victim. Once more, the effort to act is thwarted.

THE ABSURD IN THE GUISE OF DEATH

Often the futility of life is underscored by the inevitability of death, for death is the ultimate source of the absurd. The happiest life is mocked by mortality. Arbitrary, implacable annihilation is a major concern in the entire absurdist canon, and two prominent dramatists have discussed this theme as well as dramatized it. Beckett terms death "meaningless and valueless."¹ Ionesco describes his despair when

at fifteen I came to the realization that nothing could disguise for me the sight and presence of death. It was behind everything. To start the least thing I had to fight against the certainty, the anguish of absolute uselessness.²

Repeatedly recurring as a topic in Ionesco's essays, death is the "goal" of life and the source of every horror, "the agonising desecration and downfall of all values and civilizations."³

Death is occasionally personified as a character in absurdist plays. In Pinget's Architruc, Ionesco's The Killer, and Albee's The Sandbox death actually appears to claim his victim. More frequently as an unseen force or through a human instrument death spews corpses across the stage and about the wings. Victims are murdered on stage by human agents in Kopit's Oh, Dad, Poor Dad and Chamber Music, Pinter's

¹Proust (London, 1931), p. 6. Subsequent quotations from this essay will be from this edition.

²"Selections from the Journals," Yale French Studies, 29 (1962), p. 3.

³"He Who Dares Not to Hate Becomes a Traitor," Notes and..., p. 162; "The World of Ionesco," Drama in the Modern World: Plays and Essays, ed. Samuel A. Weiss (Boston, 1964), p. 480. See also "Ionesco's Confession," Show, V (January 1965), 54.

The Room, Arrabal's Picnic on the Battlefield, and Ionesco's Victims of Duty, while in the latter's The Lesson the Student is the fortieth to fall beneath the Professor's knife. Often murders occur off-stage or just after the final curtain, as in Arrabal's The Two Executioners, Beckett's All That Fall, Pinter's The Dumb Waiter, Simpson's One Way Pendulum, and Ionesco's The Killer. The latter's ancient couple in The Chairs chooses suicide, and death from natural causes claims three characters in Adamov's Ping-Pong and takes Beckett's Nell. Already cold corpses clutter Kopit's Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Arrabal's Orison, and Ionesco's Amedée.

Other images suggest imminent extinction. There are Lucky's culminating visions of skulls in Waiting for Godot, the perpetual mourning worn by Madame Rosepettle in Oh, Dad, Poor Dad and Kirby Groomkirby in One Way Pendulum, and the little girl ill with nothing but mortality in All That Fall, where each disintegrating life prolonged by doctor and surgeon is "a lingering dissolution."⁴ The Paris described in Ionesco's The Chairs was extinguished four hundred thousand years ago. And in the same dramatist's Jack the title character says the city of the future is that annihilated metropolis described by Roberta II. Her macabre visions include a baby drowning, a horse buried alive and another horse devoured by flames.

A number of absurdist plays do not merely contain images of death, but are contained by them. Albee's The Sandbox is a metaphor for death, complete with the angel of death and abundant sand for burial. Martin

⁴Krapp's Last..., p. 39. All subsequent quotations from All That Fall will be from this edition.

Esslin suggests that Pinter's The Birthday Party may be an allegory of death.⁵ Perhaps here birthday and death day are figuratively the same day. The Gentleman in Ionesco's The New Tenant entombs himself alive. In Beckett's Act Without Words II the progress of the two men may be from birth to death. The Godot which his tramps may surely expect is death, not God, and his Henry in Embers is indeed himself an ember of an almost extinguished fire. Although Bernard F. Dukore in his article "Beckett's Play, Play"⁶ ignores the futile deaths, probably by suicide, of each of these Beckett characters, the man, his wife, and his mistress are apparently denizens of some post mortem limbo.

If death itself is interminable waiting in Play, so is life a tedious process of decay in several other absurdist plays. Kopit's Sing to Me Through Open Windows foreshadows with the death of his rabbit Ottoman's own progress toward death. Death is in the air, prolonging the winters, chilling the springs, snowing on the precious first day of spring, quietly, relentlessly, efficiently stifling Ottoman. The conviction that life is mere prologue to death also is dramatized in Beckett's Happy Days, where Winnie lives in her grave, and his Endgame depicts the end of everything, from pain killer to the feeble characters themselves, who pitifully plead that their lives, all life, may finish, stop, not stall in more dreary stalemate or frozen checkmate but exterminate, annihilate the agony that is life.

⁵The Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, New York, 1961), p. 204. All subsequent quotations from this book will be from this edition, and all further quotations attributed to Martin Esslin will be from this book unless otherwise indicated.

⁶Educational Theatre Journal, XVII (March 1965), p. 19.

Two Ionesco plays are particularly extended preludes to death. In The Killer Berenger fights desperately to free all the inhabitants of the Radiant City from the curse of mortality; in Exit the King another Berenger struggles solely for his own life. "Why was I born," queries the latter Berenger plaintively, "if it wasn't for ever?"⁷ while the former envisions a fountain of youth in what is really a pool of death, irremediable death which strikes gratuitously, indiscriminately at a child, a pretty girl, a promising young man. No wages, no motives, prompt these murders. No prevention is possible; no shelter is secure. The picture of the killer will find entrance to the briefcase of every dying Edouard. The gun of every Berenger will refuse to resist the Killer's knife.

Death out of control sends life spinning out of control. Life in which death is implicit is forever threatened. And the agent of death is time, which chases man from birth to the grave in a seeming instant. Complains Vladimir

astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole,
lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps. (p. 58A)

"There is no escape from the hours and the days," says Beckett in his essay on Proust. (p. 2) Ionesco describes his theme of evanescence as "the destruction of man by time, by the fact of living."⁸

⁷ tr. Donald Watson, Plays, V (London, 1963), p. 44. All subsequent quotations from Exit the King will be from this edition.

⁸"When I Write...", Notes and..., p. 155.

All the absurdist playwrights dramatize this theme as part of their larger concern with death, also demonstrating an interest in the various inroads of time. Changes wrought by this enemy include the demise of Coco's love for Lulu in Pinet's Clope, the alienation of Krapp from his former self in Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape, and the first signs of death in Ionesco's Exit the King, such as the heating failure, the cracking walls, and the sun's disobedience to the King.

Characters fear time and regret its passing. In Kopit's Oh, Dad, Poor Dad Madame Rosepettle is skilled at frightening her victim the Commodore with taunting reminders that he is getting old. In Ionesco's The Killer Berenger laments the "lost years," (p. 16) and the same dramatist's Old Man complains in The Chairs "Time has left the marks of his wheels on our skin." (p. 132) Beckett's Krapp regards his birthday as "an awful occasion" and celebrates by singing, not "Happy Birthday," but "Now the day is over, Night is drawing nigh-igh..." (pp. 14 & 17) Pinter's Edward in A Slight Ache is so obsessed with time that he has devoted years of his life to writing an essay on the subject. No wonder that Ionesco's Jack is dissuaded from his hitherto steadfast refusal to declare a passion for hash brown potatoes by his sister's reminder "You are chronometrable."⁹ Principles are hardly worth maintaining by men measurable in time, and, therefore, mortal.

The chronometry of clocks and watches emphasizes the passing of time as it hurls the user toward death. In Simpson's One Way Pendulum

⁹Jack or The Submission: A Naturalistic Comedy," Four Plays, p. 86. All subsequent quotations from this play will be from this edition.

a death's head serves as the clock on the mantelpiece. In Ionesco's Bald Soprano underlining the speeches is a striking clock, a reminder of time exhausting itself, consuming life as fuel. In Ionesco's The Killer Berenger's watch stops shortly before his death; his time is used up. Ionesco's Amedee prominently displays a clock in his flat, and Beckett's B in Act Without Words II, a very short mime, consults his watch eleven times in his obsession with time. Even Pinter's dwarfs have pocket watches, and his Davies in The Caretaker expresses his desire for a clock to the reluctant Aston: "I mean, if you can't tell what time you're at you don't know where you are..."¹⁰ Apparently the Gentleman in Ionesco's The New Tenant would agree, for he is unable to exclude a clock from his cluttered world; even immobilized in the dark he must hear his life tick past. And Beckett's Pozzo would rather have a watch than a heart.

¹⁰The Caretaker and The Dumb Waiter (New York, 1960), p. 65. All subsequent quotations from The Caretaker will be from this edition.

THE ABSURD AS UNCERTAINTY

Time as the instrument of inevitable death and death itself are the only certainties in an otherwise uncertain universe. Absurdist characters can find nothing stable or sure. Insecurity is a guaranteed way of life.

Mysterious Menace

Sinister forces invade absurdist plays, threatening the characters with death or some other mysterious fate.

Harold Pinter is so particularly adept at suggesting the imminent fulfillment of doom that his plays are frequently labelled "comedy of menace" and T. C. Worsley has called Pinter's plays "Theatre of Insecurity."¹ Pinter himself observes that there is strong link between "horror and absurdity,"² and most of his plays dramatize this connection. As embodiments of some facet of the absurd, McCann and Goldberg harass Stanley into a nervous breakdown in The Birthday Party and Mick intimates and evicts Davies in The Caretaker. Some strange compulsion threatens the relationship between the couples Harry and Bill and James and Stella in The Collection. Edward's security is threatened and destroyed by a timid matchseller in A Slight Ache. Still more sinister and utterly inexplicable forces hound, of all people, hired killers in

¹"A New Wave Rules Britannia," Theatre Arts, XLV (October 1961), 19.

²Quoted by Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 206, from an interview with Hallam Tennyson, B. B. C. General Overseas Service, August 7, 1960.

The Dumb Waiter, bizarrely demanding exotic meals from men who have neither the ingredients nor the gas to power the stove and finally contriving the execution of Gus by his companion Ben.

Menace stalks many another character in absurdist plays. Somebody is after Pinget's Clope and may really have come for him by the end of the play when he has disappeared. Is it death which claims him--or something more horrible because uncertain, unknown? In Kopit's Sing to Me Through Open Windows Ottoman is afraid, particularly afraid of the Clown, and Ottoman's constant fears are realized when death does claim him. In the same dramatist's Oh, Dad, Poor Dad a more concrete horror hounds the Commodore, who is compelled to endure the caprices of a self-declared husband-killer. In Waiting for Godot Beckett's prosperous Pozzo is mysteriously reduced to misery overnight, and in Albee's The American Dream even babies and grandmothers are not safe from the predatory American woman.

Even Simpson's comic figures are threatened. In The Resounding Tinkle the R. S. P. A. hovers just out of sight and in Gladly Otherwise an investigator does pounce on Mrs. Brandywine, rendering her frantic as he demands an account of how her door handles got on her doors and presses her for the exact number of holes in her colanders. Typical is this mad menace:

Man: (looking round the room). I don't see the floor anywhere.

Mrs. B.: It's under the carpet.

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Man: Wall-paper? That seems to be missing.

Mrs. B.: We've had it all pushed back against the wall.

Man: (looking first at the wall, then significantly at Mrs. Brandywine). Why have you done that, Mrs. Brandywine?

Mrs. B.: It gives us more space. In the middle.³

Then, of course, Mrs. Brandywine must account for her requiring space in the middle, and every explanation, proving unsatisfactory, leads to further probing from her inquisitor.

Much more horrible is the treacherous menace of John's wife in Arrabal's The Two Executioners. She betrays John, who is guilty of some unnamed crime, perhaps that of living. He is tortured and executed in great pain--as are we all, the play seems to suggest. Arrabal's Emanu is likewise menaced and betrayed in The Automobile Graveyard, and Dilla is subjected to an equally capricious, if less deadly, chance. Dilla is struck by Milos when she refuses to kiss the customers and she is struck by Milos when she does kiss them. No choice can avert a gratuitous punishment.

Equally insecure are the characters in Adamov's plays. In As You Were a bridegroom leaving for his wedding is accosted by his mother and aunt and put to bed. In Professor Taranne the title character is crushed by sinister circumstances, his career ruined, his whole life's actions rendered futile by implacable and inexplicable forces. In Ping-Pong the fortunes of Victor, Arthur, Roger, Sutter, and Annette, and even those of Mr. Constantine and his Corporation, bounce around like the ball of the title, swatted about by unseen, irresponsible, but omnipotent forces.

³The Hole and Other Plays and Sketches (London, 1959), p. 133. All subsequent quotations from Gladly Otherwise will be from this edition.

The lives of Ionesco's characters also are invaded. The Detective barges into Victims of Duty much as does the Man in Gladly Otherwise, and Nicholas D'Eu repeats the process later in the same play, as do the three Bartholomeuses in Improvisation. Amédée's living room is invaded by both the corpse and the postman. The Killer threatens Berenger and his friends, and rhinoceri invade the world of another Berenger. In Frenzy for Two war reduces the room to rubble.

In this last Ionesco play, as the walls disintegrate under shell fire, He and She hide under the bed and reassure themselves with whatever certainties they can recall. She finds security in asserting "When I was small, I was a child," and "In the autumn the leaves fall."⁴

But these are among the few such dependable stable elements in the absurdist universe. The absurdist menace undermines all possibility of finding certainties, whether petty or vital. In this same Frenzy for Two, chaos reigns. He complains that even the light switch is never in the same place. Opinions are relative, depending on the season, and an assertion of an opinion is frequently qualified, as in He's statement "A Beauty's always beautiful. With a few exceptions." (p. 38) Paradoxes prevail, contributing further to undermining a comfortable security. She assures He "You annoy me. Stop annoying me and you'll still annoy me." (p. 35)

The simplest relationship is turned topsy-turvy in Ionesco's world, as a gentleman attempting to purchase an automobile finds himself marrying

⁴tr. Donald Watson, Evergreen Review, IX (June 1965), 38-39. All subsequent quotations from Frenzy for Two will be from this edition.

it instead in The Motor Show and a married couple composed of human partners, in The Bald Soprano, is exposed as not married at all.

As Vladimir says three times in Waiting for Godot, "Nothing is certain..." (p. 10B. Similar sentiments are expressed on pp. 18A & 35B) So prevalent is uncertainty in this play that Raymond Williams calls it a morality of "uncertainty rather than of faith..."⁵ But this theme is not exclusive with Ionesco and Beckett. The pinball game and the ping-pong rules are constantly changing in Adamov's Ping-Pong, and in Pinget's Dead Letter the same funeral takes place both yesterday and today. That no character can rely on anything is stressed by Simpson, whose Bro is not sure how many stories his home has. Simpson stresses the uncertainty through the paradoxes in such titles as One Way Pendulum and A Resounding Tinkle. His Bro and Middle are ever the Paradocks family. The impossibility of ever being sure of the simplest statement reduces Arrabal's Fando to tears. But he cries over a minor matter; he is forced by the bully Namur to admit that a kangaroo may not be worse than a pig.

Anchor in Instability

When casual supports crumble at a casual touch, the character might be expected to recover. But uncertainty invades the eternal verities in these plays, assaulting not only religion but logic and science as well. An attempt to depend on any of these supposedly reliable disciplines

⁵"Hope Deferred," New Statesman, LXI (May 19, 1961), 802.

leaves characters still adrift, for religion, logic and science are featherweight anchors, perhaps deceptively ready to sink and hold fast, but equally apt to float or fly.

Religious concern is not evident in every play; frequently God is merely conspicuous by his absence. But mockery, gentle or acid, is implicit in a play whenever the characters do profess faith.

Beckett's *Lucky* speaks of a personal God who does not care about people. Although God may exist in Waiting for Godot, his existence does not interfere with man's suffering. In All That Fall, the Rooneys laugh at the text that the Lord raiseth the fallen; as William R. Mueller and Josephine Jacobsen observe, the Rooneys "see no evidence of this."¹ In Beckett's Endgame Hamm proclaims that God does not exist at all. Suffering here need not be interrupted by hope or relieved by prayer.

Particularly bitter concern with religion is evident in plays by Simpson and Arrabal. In Simpson's The Hole the characters derive a fraudulent religious experience from the junction box in the title hole. The prayer on Generating Sunday is in the name of Volta, Ampere, and Galvani, and Michael Faraday is canonized. There is no permanence in these beliefs, for before the discovery of the junction box the characters are reciting "I believe in one aquarium, which was and is and shall be...",² and Soma opposes worshipping the junction box one moment and

¹"Samuel Beckett's Long Saturday: To Wait or Not to Wait?" Man in the Modern Theatre, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (Richmond, Virginia, 1965), p. 96.

²(London, 1958), p. 20. All subsequent quotations from The Hole will be from this edition, not that of 1959.

delivers an impassioned sermon to its greater glory the next. Religious services are deprived of all religious import; the characters in A Resounding Tinkle reverently render "Sweet Polly Oliver" as a hymn. Simpson perhaps does not despair of God's existence, as other absurdists appear to do, but he certainly criticizes man's understanding of religion and worship.

The God of Arrabal's characters is distorted by their warped values. In Orison Lilbe is ashamed because God can see her urinate. In The Automobile Graveyard the Christ figure, Emanu, kills people and knows a definition of goodness only by rote, forgetting it as soon as he is worn out by running from the police. He even thinks Dilla is good because she will allow any man to sleep with her, and he frequently avails himself of her services. Subsequently he is crucified on a bicycle.

Bereft of religious solace, these characters are likewise deprived of reliance upon logic. Even common sense leads to ridiculous conclusions. For instance, Simpson's James Whinby in The Form sleeps standing up because "If you sleep lying down it isn't everyone who bothers to step over you."³ In A Resounding Tinkle Uncle Ted spends all day and all night traveling on the train in order to listen to the radio in Euston. She (Uncle Ted is a woman) rejects the sensible alternative of having her own radio at home. Mr. Smith in Ionesco's The Bald Soprano puzzles about the reason for the newspaper omitting the ages of the newly born. He judges that the omission "doesn't make sense,"⁴ never dreaming that his

³The Hole and Other Plays and Sketches, p. 110. All subsequent quotations from The Form will be from this edition.

⁴Four Plays, p. 11. All subsequent quotations from The Bald Soprano will be from this edition.

own brain has shortcircuited.

One facet of the irrational or perhaps arational universe is revealed through the simultaneous assertion of mutually contradictory possibilities. Ionesco's Jack abounds with such statements. Jacqueline assures Jack that she loves and detests him and Mother Jack is "completely half desperate." (p. 83) In the same play, Mother and Father Robert have two only daughters. Doubletalk is also prevalent in Rhinoceros where an Ionesco character announces, "The fact that I despise religion doesn't mean I don't esteem it highly."⁵ Other absurdists who undermine in this fashion a logically plausible conclusion are Beckett and Pinter. Beckett's tramps are not native to the area, yet Estragon insists that he has never left there. In The Birthday Party Goldberg and McCann accuse Stanley of killing his wife and moments later ask why he never married.

Even formal logic proves fallacious. The careful investigation by the Martins in The Bald Soprano of the possibility of their previous acquaintance seems to result in the indisputable conclusion that they are married. But even a mountain of facts is not sufficient evidence and the extensive investigation is proved futile by the Smith's maid (who is, of course, Sherlock Holmes in disguise!). In the same play, Mrs. Smith attempts to reason inductively, concluding "Experience teaches us that when one hears the doorbell ring it is because there is never anyone there." (p. 23) Syllogisms are sheer tautology in the mouth of Arrabal's Emanu: "Giraffes go up in elevators...because they go up in

⁵Rhinoceros and Other Plays, tr. Derek Prouse (New York, 1960), p. 41. All subsequent quotations from Rhinoceros will be from this edition.

elevators,"⁶ and are sheer nonsense when propounded in Rhinoceros by the professional logician, who reasons something like this: All cats have four paws. Your dog has four paws. Therefore your dog is a cat. (see p. 18)

Since any system of logic will do as well as any other, Arrabal's Fando devises his own personal method; he resolves that the first person to use the words "which way" is invariably correct. He has anticipated the possibility that no one may introduce those words and consequently has developed an extensive list of other possible words and has even developed an alternative method of ascertaining who is right.

Fando. It's like this: on the days which are multiples of three, men who wear glasses are in the right. On even days, mothers are in the right, and on the days which end in a nought, nobody's right.⁷

Two Ionesco characters do not produce such impressive but fallacious logic. Berenger manages to reason correctly, but his efforts are not rewarded because reason is impotent against a gratuitous Killer. At the opposite pole are the efforts of the pupil in The Lesson. She cannot reason at all, erroneously or impeccably, and she is consequently reduced to relying on her memory for the solution of multiplication problems. Remembering all possible results of all possible multiplications replaces attempting to mentally grasp such a baffling concept as that three two's must be six.

⁶"The Automobile Graveyard," Two Plays by Arrabal, tr. Richard Howard (New York, 1960), p. 27. All subsequent quotations from this play will be from this edition.

⁷"Fando and Lis," Four Plays, tr. Barbara Wright (London, 1962), p. 72. All subsequent quotations from this play will be from this edition.

In the previous examples reason defies reasonable analysis. In other instances the mind not only plays pranks but it produces logic of a most pernicious kind. Reason is a positive source of evil in Rhinoceros, exculpating the rhino instead of defending the morally correct posture of Berenger. Reason is vilified because it rationalizes and excuses itself from the task of combating mass hysteria. Logic is as dead as the Housewife's cat--who may be Socrates, since that venerable Greek philosopher is also demonstrated to be a cat. Dead philosophy is dangerous, and what is wrong, or rather right, with Berenger is that he is "devoid of logic." (p. 19) Intuition may perceive the truth; logic merely obscures it.

Ionesco is not the only playwright to dramatize the evil inherent in logic. Kirby Groomkirby's study of logic requires him to find a "logical pretext" for wearing black in One Way Pendulum. (p. 81) Therefore he murders people in order to mourn his victims. No crime could have a more reasonable motive. Also in this Simpson play, logic is adeptly twisted to prove the impossible. The Judge demonstrates that the odds weigh overwhelmingly against a person's being in a particular location at a specific instant, since there are an infinite number of other locations which the person might possibly occupy. Injustice is perpetrated when Kirby, a proven killer, is released so that the court may not be denied the right to arrest him for any crimes he may commit in the future.

Kopit, Pinter and Beckett also appear to blaspheme at the shrine of pseudo-reason, which is exposed as a mask for stupidity, cupidity, fraud, or vanity. In Oh, Dad, Poor Dad Madame Rosepettle makes life impossible

for her son, tying him to her carnivorous apron strings, reasoning that she must shelter him.

I don't let him out because he is my son.
 I don't let him out because his skin is as white as fresh snow and he would burn if the sun struck him. I don't let him out because outside there are trees with birds sitting on their branches waiting for him to walk beneath. I don't let him out because you're there, waiting behind the bushes with your skirt up. I don't let him out because he is susceptible.⁸

Stifling his growth is not in the boy's best interest, no matter how Madame Rosepettle may explain her acts.

Reason is culpable in Waiting for Godot where it fortifies illusions which enable men to exist oblivious to the absurdity of their condition, encouraging them to search hopefully for some "reasons unknown" which will logically explain their suffering. Reason is likewise guilty in The Caretaker where reasonable men, by means of a prefrontal lobotomy, have imposed their norm of empty headedness upon the illogical or alogical but nevertheless lucid mind of Aston.

The absurdist world defies not only the laws of logic but those of science as well. Scientific fact is reduced to gibberish and characters have not a single source of security. There is a new mathematics, indeed, one in which seven and one are usually eight but occasionally nine, in The Lesson. In A Resounding Tinkle, Middie cannot believe that twenty divided by four is five without seeing it first. In The Birthday

⁸ Arthur Kopit, Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet (New York, 1962), p. 45. All subsequent quotations from this play will be from this edition.

Party Pinter's characters wonder if the number 846 is possible or necessary. Certainly it is not trustworthy!

Biology is bizarre in Arrabal, Simpson, and Ionesco. Anatomical theory is contravened in The Automobile Graveyard; an old woman runs endless laps but evinces no fatigue, whereas an athlete faints from exhaustion after maintaining the same pace. In The Form, so uncertain is James Whinby of Mother Nature's reliability that he must superintend for himself the circulation of his blood. In Ionesco's Amedee it's a fact: "The dead grow old faster than the living." (p. 14) Corpses also grow larger in geometrical progression and must frequently have their nails trimmed. In Victims of Duty Madeleine takes poison, dies, and then reenters, not as a ghost, but quite alive and well. In The Future Is in Eggs, while the dead Grandfather-Jacques retains the use of limbs and voice, though confined somewhat by his picture frame, Jacques has labor pains and Roberta lays eggs for Jacques to hatch. Apparently these eggs may grow to gigantic proportions, for the title character of Jack was almost fourteen when he was born.

Physics and chemistry are no more usual or reliable. Singing near metal or wood causes the formation of a green mold in Simpson's One Blast and Have Done and the world may be square for all that the Comedians in A Resounding Tinkle know. As for the law of gravity, it is only weakly operative. Mr. Gantry says it took him three hours to hit the ground after falling off a cliff; he spent the time determining how hard to fall. In Ionesco's The New Tenant gravity seems to have some inverse influence. Large, seemingly heavy and ponderous objects are light weight, and delicate vases are extraordinarily heavy.

Simply nothing physical seems stable or reliable in Simpson's plays. When a fork is thrown away in The Hole it becomes a bloodstained knife. When his train moves generally in the proper direction and eventually arrives at his destination, Uncle Ted, in A Resounding Tinkle, finds this matter for comment. The senses are deceptive; the eyes especially cannot be trusted. James Whinby wonders whether the chair opposite him is indeed opposite him. And empirical evidence leads the characters in The Hole to a variety of contradictory conclusions. One moment someone sees fish in the hole; at another he views people playing games. Even the games keep changing, shifting, merging with others. For instance, Spider is known for clearing his pole vault hurdle with a beautiful backhand drive, and his poised domino is a blind for the seven of clubs, with which he trumps every bishop.

Sometimes inexorable time itself behaves in an entirely unpredictable manner. In an absurdist universe, even the clocks mock logic, striking erratically like the wayward one in Ionesco's The Bald Soprano which "strikes as much as it likes," (p. 19) and the equally arbitrary clocks in Kopit's Oh, Dad, Poor Dad. In Simpson's One Way Pendulum Kirby Groomkirby will not trust the second hand of his stop watch, so he times his eggs with the cash register and the telephone. In Simpson's A Resounding Tinkle, time shifts backwards and forwards by hundreds of years; at one moment the theories of Columbus and Galileo have not yet been established and at another Middie Paradock is worrying that someone will arrive with papers proving that it is really eighteen sixty-eight. Time plays still merrier pranks in the same dramatist's The Hole. Sid is "never in the same week for more than two minutes together," (p. 30) and

Ben is dreadfully tired of fifty-two weeks every blessed year. Perhaps ten seconds after their last parting, Endo tells Soma "It must be sixteen years and a month since we met, counting leap years," eliciting the reply, of course, "I think it might be as well not to count the leap years." (p. 33).

Time ceases to have meaning in a mad world. No matter what the century, time will hurry men to the grave, so Simpson's James Whinby in The Form can give any date for his christening; 1928, 1850, 1783--any year will do. Nor does it much matter how long it took him to return to the present after he froze to death while he was a heating engineer in the Ice Age. Jumbled time of this sort, like the simultaneous existence of Bobby Watson's wife as his bride-to-be and his widow in Ionesco's Bald Soprano and the companionship of Queen Isabella of Spain and Susan B. Anthony in Kopit's Chamber Music, reveals that time is no longer a reassuringly predictable part of a continuum, but is irrational and arbitrary. It is out of the control of its victims, temporarily freezing the aging of Beckett's Gogo and Didi, who would welcome the end of their lives, but ravaging Pozzo and Lucky of sight and speech in a single speeding day.

With religion, logic, and science crumbling, man is thus deprived of three major means of ordering life. Another factor which deprives life of meaning is the unreliability of the memory. Even if sources of faith and knowledge were available, absurdist characters would have no means of retaining and accumulating wisdom. Another possible anchor in security is denied them.

In the plays of all nine dramatists under consideration, characters cannot remember the simplest, most familiar things. In Albee's The American Dream, Mrs. Barker expends part of her busy day calling on Mommy and Daddy, but she cannot recall why she has come or in what capacity, nor can Mommy and Daddy remember why they asked her. It is no surprise that these two model American dreams of parents cannot remember that, since they also do not recall their baby's name. And Grandma does not remember whose mother she is. In Kopit's Chamber Music the women forget that they have killed Amelia Earhart. Pinter also creates a number of absent-minded characters. In Last to Go the newspaper man cannot remember the names of the papers he sells nor the last name of the friend whom he is seeking. In The Caretaker Davies does not know where he was born, and Mr. Kidd, the landlord in The Room, does not know how many floors there are in his house.

Surely Simpson's James Whinby is more than careless; he has forgotten what name he was christened with. And Arrabal's Emanu cannot remember the recitation of what goodness does for men. Beckett's Estragon remembers from day to day a total of almost nothing; he forgets Pozzo and Pozzo returns the compliment. Nor can the Boy remember the tramps. The tramps struggle to remember their favorite quotations, as does Beckett's Winnie in Happy Days. The Bible and Shakespeare, the unforgettable lines, are so easily forgotten.

Ionesco's Old Woman in The Chairs forgets the same story every day, and the Pupil in The Lesson recalls the four seasons only with profound difficulty. When Choubert in Victims of Duty cannot remember whether he ever knew the Mallots or where or when he knew them or how Mallot

spelled his name or what he looked like, Choubert's memory is plumbed and plugged but is still recalcitrant, or perhaps calcified. The Martins, though married, do not recall having met before, and Amédée no longer knows who the corpse is or who killed it.

An entire play by Pinget dramatizes the unreliability of the human memory. In his The Old Tune, as adapted by Beckett, two old men recall shared experiences, each, in contradiction to the other, vociferously asserting his version of the "facts." The names of their grandchildren elude the men, and more distant experiences are muddled, as in this exchange:

Gorman. 1906 yes at Chatham.

Cream. The Gunners?

Gorman. The Foot, the Foot.

Cream. But the Foot wasn't Chatham don't you remember, there it was the Gunners, you must have been at Caterham, Caterham, the Foot.

Gorman. Chatham I tell you, isn't it like yesterday, Morrison's pub on the corner.

Cream. Harrison's, Harrison's Oak Lounge, do you think I don't know Chatham. I used to go there on holiday with Mrs. Cream, I know Chatham backwards Gorman, inside and out, Harrison's Oak Lounge on the corner of what was the name of the street, on a rise it was, it'll come back to me, do you think I don't know Harrison's Oak Lounge there on the corner of dammit I'll forget my own name next and the square it'll come back to me.⁹

⁹Plays, I, pp. 8-9. All subsequent quotations from The Old Tune will be from this edition.

VITIATED VALUES

These people with whimsical memories frequently behave erratically too. Ordinary acts become extraordinary in absurdist plays. Simpson's Dr. Sangster in The Form comes over once a year from Venezuela to be cremated. His Cerebro replies, when offered an onion, "I don't eat, thanks." (p. 28) Ionesco's title character in The Leader sucks his thumb to great acclaim. His admirers point wildly at him and then chase him by running in the opposite direction. Perhaps Arrabal's characters in Picnic on the Battlefield behave most strangely. During a bombing they casually stand out in the open chatting under the protection of an umbrella while Zapo's mother, penetrating to the important issues of life, scolds Zapo for having dirty hands in the trenches.

Perhaps this is the key to much of the peculiar behavior of absurdist characters; they do not properly evaluate their conduct. Criteria for behavior are unreliable guides because, in an absurdist world without purpose or meaning, without the possibility of achievement or immortality, values as standards of conduct are thoroughly undermined.

The lives of many absurdist characters are vitiated by false values. Miss Fitt in Beckett's All That Fall worries that her mother might have been in a train wreck, but her major regret seems to be caused by the possible waste a wreck would entail of the fresh sole for their lunch. One wonders how fresh Miss Fitt's soul is. Ionesco's Jack wants a homelier wife than he is offered, and the same dramatist's characters in Maid to Marry seem to have reversed their concepts of good and bad. The Lady and Gentleman are horrified by a seemingly innocuous statement

made by the former's daughter (who is, of course, a man with a moustache), but the Lady is very proud that her daughter is joining "a firm that deals in fraudulent transactions."¹ In Simpson's One Way Pendulum Sylvia pouts like a typical English young lady, but her reason is bizarre; her father will not buy her a new pair of glands so that her arms may hang down to her knees. Bro, in A Resounding Tinkle, also suffers from an ungratified desire. He has a death wish. He does indulge this craving in one permissible way, though, by avoiding anything that might make him look younger. In the same play the Paraddock's neighbor Mrs. Stencil is civic minded and supports all the worthy charities. She is presently engaged in collecting money to buy parachutes for eagles on behalf of the Birds of Prey Protection League.

Arrabal, an expatriote from the police state of Franco's Spain, is particularly concerned with human standards, and his characters are particularly inhumane, their values particularly warped. In Picnic on the Battlefield the two Red Cross corpsmen are most annoyed because they can find no corpses. Toso, Mitaro and Namur in Fando and Lis extensively admire Lis' tongue, teeth and knees before noticing that she is dead. These characters also think it would be great fun to play with cockroaches. In several of Arrabal's plays characters actually are concerned specifically with being good, but with gruesome results. Frances in The Two Executioners is a saint, a saint who torments her husband to the grave while convincing her sons of her perfection. Emanu is a killer

¹The Killer and Other Plays, p. 158. All subsequent quotations from Maid to Marry will be from this edition.

who admires the pimps and whores who frolic in their automobile graveyard.

The characters in Arrabal's Orison make a complete study of the comparative advantages of following vice and virtue. If they try being good they might find themselves less bored. Still, they will not be able to tell lies any more, or steal oranges from the grocer, or sleep together. If they do not sleep together any more, they will get cold, but at least there will be no more fighting over the blankets, and their goodness might get them into heaven where they could enjoy themselves. Being good may be nicer than being bad, and it will make God write in gold letters and ensure that they will be very important people. Still, they conclude, they will not be able to kill people or poke out the eyes of the corpses, so they will probably tire of being good.

Frequently in absurdist plays the scale of values is inverted. Distortion renders the trivial of immense importance and reduces the truly important to insignificance. The inconsequential often is magnified out of proportion in Ionesco's plays. In The Bald Soprano Mrs. Martin causes a commotion by her account of seeing a man tying his shoe lace. The characters in Victims of Duty worry about and kill over the precise spelling of a name, and He and She in Frenzy for Two are so obsessed by trivia that they ignore the annihilation of their neighborhood. They fight over many petty matters, such as the affinity of a tortoise and a snail, while dismembered corpses dangle from the ceiling, occasionally bobbing right against He and She. Similar lack of perspective is evident in Simpson's plays, as in Mrs. Paradock's contention in A Resounding Tinkle that names and food are the only things "worth

quarreling about."² In Pinter's plays characters also waste their lives in small talk, as in Last to Go.

Materialism is a special manifestation of the overevaluation of certain aspects of life. Ionesco exploits this particular concern with the trivial, making it the central theme of The Painting, a play in which men of spiritual worth are such slaves to the wealthy that a painter must pay a rich man so that the latter will keep the former's painting. In Amédée Madeleine protects her property instead of her marriage. She is more concerned with preventing her husband from stepping on her poison mushrooms than with establishing a living relationship with him. In Jack Roberta's assets are not a good disposition or a maternal instinct but the objects of which she is composed; she boasts feet, a hand, toes, armpits and calves. Jack values, not beauty, but the sheer quantity of Roberta's nine fingers and three noses.

In Albee's The American Dream the characters surround themselves with objects. Their hollow souls are like the empty space contained by their picture frames, devoid of substance, but bordered by solid material ostentation. Unable to cherish anything but money or what it will buy, Mommy makes a terrible scene over the petty problem of the color of a hat. She can squeeze out the semblance of tears after Grandma's departure, but only after realizing that the old lady may

²New English Dramatists, II, ed. Tom Maschler (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1960), p. 115. Subsequent quotations from the full length version of A Resounding Tinkle are from this edition and most references are to this edition. Occasional quotations may be, where noted, from the one-act version of the play (London, 1958).

have stolen something. Mommy and Daddy have mutilated their baby because it offended their false sense of decency, and they are inconsolable (once they remember what the matter is) not because the baby died but because they had paid for it. The child was a commodity, and they obtain satisfaction by receiving a replacement which, although incomplete, is of unblemished exterior quality.

The commercialization of the soul is likewise a concern in Adamov's Ping-Pong. Victor and Roger are reduced to nonentities in their dedication to a worthless industrial enterprise, the manufacture of pinball machines. After a lifetime in the pinball business, Victor is killed while playing another game, ping-pong, for, ironically, the games are so trivial that they are interchangeable.³

The distortion which reduces the significant to the stature of a petty consideration is a technique, like its inversion, of Ionesco and Simpson. The latter's Mrs. Paradock notices Don's change of sex but blithely finds it no cause for concern; she has always wanted a girl. The news about the infection of Berenger's city with rhinoceritis is judged of so little significance that it first appears in the dead cat's column. When the corpse bashes into their living room, Amédée and Madeleine seem only mildly annoyed and Amédée observes calmly "Everyone

³That their fanatic dedication to a worthless cause might be analyzed as typical not only of absurdist characters but also of twentieth-century man can be seen by examining an article by Erich Fromm. Fromm speaks of modern men who are slaves to machines, who are alienated from their actions and ruled by them, and who idolize their institutions instead of managing them. His view of modern man is much that of Adamov. Fromm on modern man seems to describe the characters in Ping-Pong: "The man whose life is centered around producing, selling and consuming commodities transforms himself into a commodity." "Our Way of Life Makes Us Miserable," Saturday Evening Post, CCXXXVII (July 25-August 1, 1964), 10.

has problems." (p. 28) In Victims of Duty Choubert's world is interspersed with events whose comparative importance he cannot distinguish.

Nothing ever happens. A few comets and a cosmic disturbance somewhere in the universe. Nothing to speak of. The neighbors have been fined for letting their dogs make a mess on the pavement. (p. 117)

If events all merge into an indistinguishable blur because of the absence of any standard by which to evaluate them, so too does the behavior of some absurdist characters conform to trivial standards or leaden habit.

CONFORMITY AND IDENTITY

In absurdist plays conformity is enforced by society, sometimes on resisting nonconformists. Gus is a quelled in The Dumb Waiter, perhaps because he asks so many questions. Aston had been committed to an asylum because he was unlike other people, and he has been released only after having had his dreams hacked out of his brain with a knife. Stanley is reduced to an easily molded bit of clay, nothing more. These Pinter characters have been guilty of the sin of nonconformity, as were the babies described in Albee's The American Dream, one of which was killed while the other was deprived of his emotional potential. Mrs. Barker in this play, although certainly not slaughtered or battered into mindless submission, is sharply put in her place. It is proper for her to take off her dress, but she must not think of smoking or drinking. Ionesco's Jack is forced both to love hash brown potatoes and to marry. Ionesco's antipathy toward conformity also is evident in Rhinoceros, which depicts Berenger as both the only nonconformist and the only respectable man in the town. Berenger resists shaving, wearing a clean shirt, getting to work on time, and joining the rhinoceros herd.

Although some characters are mangled beneath social pressure, others seem willingly to adopt whatever mores are in vogue. Twice Ionesco criticizes the "man of fixed ideas,"¹ explaining that conformity is a major object of his attack in The Bald Soprano and Rhinoceros. Beckett

¹"In the Long Run I am for Classicism," Notes and..., pp. 130-131; "The Tragedy of Language," Notes and..., p. 180. See also "Remarks on My Theatre and on the Remarks of Others," Notes and..., pp. 72-73. All subsequent quotations from these articles will be from this edition.

also expresses disgust with the unthinking adherence to accepted, repetitive patterns: "Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit." (Proust, p. 8) Beckett dramatically depicts this chain in Happy Days. Winnie's life is reduced to conditioned reflexes. For Simpson's Kirby Groomkirby, too, meals, waking and sleeping, life itself are habits stimulated by Pavlov's bell. In A Resounding Tinkle a man working through the street directory trying to find someone to form a government can find no one willing to attempt something so out of the ordinary. In the same play Bro and Middie repeat the same lines over and over. They do not recognize their own repetition, nor do they notice when, on their favorite radio program, these same lines are repeated still once more. They do not notice because there is nothing remarkable in identical conversation issuing from identical people. People who conform are carbon copies. In Simpson's The Hole Sid is afraid his breathing is out of step with everybody else's and there is nothing he would not give "to be identical with somebody." (p. 11)

The clichés spouted by Pinter's Goldberg in The Birthday Party reflect the mass produced standards which have molded his every act.

You know what? I've never lost a tooth, Not since the day I was born. Nothing's changed.... That's why I've reached my position, McCann. Because I've always been as fit as a fiddle. All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrongI kept my eye on the ball....Learn by heart. Never write down a thing. No. And don't go too near the water.²

²Two Plays: The Birthday Party and The Room (New York, 1959), p. 80. All subsequent from The Birthday Party will be from this edition.

Obviously this aberration concerning the importance of conformity, so evident in many absurdist plays, is closely connected with the problem of identity. In The American Dream, the play in which Grandma pronounces conformity equivalent to "deformity,"³ women join the same clubs, repeat the same platitudes, and wear the same hats. People who adhere to the same rigid norms soon become duplicates. Groups may all bear the same name or any name may do for anyone. Either kind of handling of appellations by absurdist playwrights strongly suggests that the characters so designated are nonentities, possessing no individuality. Of the former sort, referred to in The Bald Soprano are the ten people all of whom are called Bobby Watson. In Jack and The Future Is in Eggs, both also by Ionesco, Jacques' family are called Father-Jacques, Mother Jacques, Grandfather Jacques, Grandmother Jacques, and Jacqueline. His wife's family are all Robert and Roberta.

However, in Jack multiple names also are employed for the same character. Mother Jack calls Father Jack "Gaaton," and RobertaII tells Jack that her real name is Liza. The Mallot or Mallod sought in Victims of Duty may also have gone by the names Marius, Marin, Lougastec, Perpignan, or Machecroche. In Kopit's Oh, Dad, Poor Dad Madame Rosepettle never uses her son's name, Jonathan, but calls him Albert thirteen times, Edward nine times, and Robinson eight times. Mrs. Duranty in Adamov's Ping-Pong calls Annette "Dorothy," and Soma in Simpson's The Hole calls Endo "Harry."

³Edward Albee, Three Plays (New York, 1962), p. 21. All subsequent quotations from The American Dream will be from this edition.

In Pinter's The Room, the Sands say that the landlord is not named Mr. Kidd. Rose Hudd insists that the blind man's name is not Riley, and he insists on calling her "Sal." In The Birthday Party Pinter's McCann is also called Dermot and Seamus. Goldberg himself calls McCann "Dermot" and shortly thereafter does not know who Mr. Boles is designating when he uses that name. But Goldberg might have good reason to be confused, since his own name also shifts frequently. He is called Simey by his wife and mother and Benny by his father. His name is Nat. And his son, named Emanuel, called Manny at one time, is Timmy at the next reference. Beckett's Pozzo answers to both "Cain" and "Abel." Estragon tells Pozzo that his name is Adam. Estragon is never called "Estragon," but always "Gogo," just as Vladimir is called "Didi" by his friend--and "Mr. Albert" by the boy. Even Godot's name is confused by Pozzo.

Many other methods are employed by the absurdists to suggest that men are nonentities or universal types. There are other kinds of games with names. Mrs. Barker is such a typical club woman that Albee's Daddy cannot recall her name. She might just as well be called "what's-her-name." Again in The Birthday Party Stanley forgets his own name and takes as a replacement "Joe Soap." Simpson's Endo in The Hole twists the routine canter about forgetting familiar names to suggest the blank cipher that is his friend's personality. "Do you know, I remember your name as if it was yesterday--but I'm damned if I haven't completely forgotten your face for a moment." (p. 33) Other exchanges involving familiar or forgotten faces are in Pinter's The Caretaker and Beckett's Waiting for Godot. In the former Mick tells Davies that he is the spitting image of three other men. The insecure Davies is using an assumed name, and,

apparently, an assumed face as well; he is a mere replica of Mick's uncle's brother and of an acquaintance of Mick's in Shoreditch--or somewhere--and of a fellow Mick once bumped into. A nothing. A living mirror for other men.

But better to be a mirror image than a man with no reflection at all, like Pinter's Mark in The Dwarfs, a play which, like the same author's The Collection, is much concerned with mirrors, and like The Bald Soprano's Mr. Martin, who cannot see himself in the mirror. In the same play Mr. Smith compares his wife to a widow, suggesting that he is not a conspicuous presence himself. In fact, the Smiths and the Martins are so nebulous as to be interchangeable, and the play ends with the Martins replacing the Smiths in a repetition of the beginning of the first scene. Customers of Pinget's Clope are identical too. He tells Madame Boulette and Madame Tronc exactly the same fortunes, word for word, except that the former can expect a legacy and the latter a gift. Flan thinks he fixes the cards.

Flan. You can't tell me they always come out the same.

Clope. Not the cards. The people. (p. 42)

Some absurdist characters are not consciously bothered by the problem of identity. Others, however, are plagued with a desire for some stable personality. But in an uncertain universe, personal identity is precarious and may shift. In Pete's dream in The Dwarfs by Pinter, people's faces are peeling off, and Edward's role is exchanged with that of the Matchseller in A Slight Ache. In The American Dream Albee's Mommy does not recognize Mrs. Barker, and, when Grandma moves out, her room is lost. Adamov's bridegroom in As We Were suddenly reverts

to childhood, and the same dramatist's Professor Taranne, while he knows who he is, cannot convince his old friends of his identity. He begins to doubt his own existence as he finds the notebook which he has filled blank in the middle, the map showing his seat in the place of honor in the ship's dining room blank, and his room key missing from the hotel rack. The Professor's identity, like Grandma's room, seems to have disappeared.

In One Way Pendulum, since his body has been replenished with food, Arthur Groomkirby is now a different person from the man he was the previous year. In another Simpson play, A Resounding Tinkle, the First Comedian talks first as though he were Columbus and then just like Galileo. And in a third play by Simpson, The Form, James Whinby, who is nervous, timid, and incompetent in the first half, is aggressive and successful in the second half. After having had no replies at all at hand, he suddenly has an answer for everything.

Most of the other absurdist playwrights dramatize the shifting or otherwise unstable personality. In Arrabal's The Automobile Graveyard, the athlete and trainer trade places. First Tio ssido is the exhausted sprinter and Lasca, although an old woman, is quite fresh. Then Lasca grows tired from doing calisthenics and Tio ssido seems rested. Finally Lasca wears both the track clothes and the original exhaustion of her companion, and Tio ssido paces her. Beckett examines the problem of the evanescent personality in Krapp's Last Tape, where the old Krapp is alienated from his former self, and in Waiting for Godot. In Act II of the latter play Estragon's recalcitrant boots suddenly fit. Either they have changed, or, more likely, he has. From one day to the next,

even man's feet are not dependably too big.

Ionesco is frequently concerned with shifting identity, most extensively in Victims of Duty. As Choubert searches for himself he mutates through a variety of roles, and the other characters change comparably, as many possible human relationships are explored. As Choubert is husband, lover, son, actor, and culprit, so is Madeleine progressively wife, mistress, old hag, mother, a stranger in the theatre, and a beggarwoman. The Detective participates as himself and becomes also father, doctor, and a member of Choubert's audience. He and Madeleine each have a try at being corpses, although this perhaps unglamorous role does not suit the woman. Other changes dramatized in Ionesco characters are the mutation of the daughter in Maid to Marry to a man (as Simpson's Don or Uncle Ted changes to a woman), and the progressive alterations in character in The Painting and The Lesson, as the timid and the assured exchange personalities in each play, and the revelation of hidden personalities in The Chairs. In the last play, the Old Woman reveals her suppressed eroticism and the Old Man becomes a child, crying for his mother because he is all wet from having spilt his career. And the description of Bobby Watson's wife, Bobby Watson, in The Bald Soprano suggests that even her physical features are unstable.

She has regular features and yet one cannot say that she is pretty. She is too big and stout. Her features are not regular but still one can say that she is very pretty. She is a little too small and too thin. She's a voice teacher. (p. 12)

These absurdist characters wonder, in the midst of such frequent personality changes, who they are and whether they do, in fact, exist.

In All That Fall Miss Fitt speculates, "I suppose the truth is I am not there, Mrs. Rooney, just not really there at all." (p. 55) Beckett's tramps, although grieved that Godot's boy never recognizes them, still "always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist." (p. 44B) If they did not work so hard at it, they too might fear they were "not really there at all." Jonathan's stuttering may be traceable to this fear. His speech is almost completely relieved of impediment once Rosalie accepts him as "Jonathan," not Albert, or Edward, or Robinson, or some other name not his. Oh, Dad, Poor Dad is not the only Kopyt play in which someone is concerned about who he is. Each psychosis in Chamber Music is manifested as a delusion about identity, and even the insane keep careful hold upon a single assumed character. Mrs. Mozart is quite sure she is not Mrs. Bach!

In an Ionesco play, The Bald Soprano, the Martins take great pains to establish their identities, but the proof on which they have founded their deductions is unreliable. "It is in vain that he thinks he is Donald, it is in vain that she thinks she is Elizabeth." (p. 19) Tiossido needs identification in Arrabal's The Automobile Graveyard in order to get a car for the night. His identity is represented just as well by his track number as by his name, so, the call of sex being strong, he tears that off and gives it up.

Many Pinter characters also are conscious participants in the struggle to find an identity. As Len knows in The Dwarfs, "The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what....But who are

you?¹⁴ Davies in The Caretaker is concerned with answering this question. But he goes under an assumed name, he has left behind his identification papers and never seems likely to reclaim them, and his efforts to become what the brothers would like him to be merely result in an accusation that he is impersonating an interior decorator. In A Night Out and The Birthday Party men are robbed of what identity they can establish. In the former play, Mrs. Stokes denies her son any existence independent of her. And poor Stanley, already pestering Mrs. Boles about who he is even before his tormentors' arrival, is subsequently so persecuted that he loses the power to act of his own volition and to speak and thus assert his identity. The running jibes of the mysterious interlopers include exchanges specifically designed to convince Stanley that he is no one.

McCann. Who are you, Webber?

Goldberg. What makes you think you exist?

McCann. You're dead. (p. 55)

And dead he might as well be.

⁴Three Plays (New York, 1961), p. 103. All subsequent quotations from The Dwarfs will be from this edition.

NON-COMMUNICATION AND ISOLATION

Deprived of the power of speech, Stanley in The Birthday Party, is denied one of the major means of asserting his existence. Many other characters attempt to stabilize their identities by capturing an audience which can guarantee the speaker's existence. Talk, talk, talk replaces thought as man's proof of his existence. Decartes' Je pense, donc je suis becomes, in the absurdist world, Tu entends dire que je pense, donc je suis. In Beckett's Endgame Hamm is so desperate for an audience that he bribes his father to listen to him. The characters in Waiting for Godot are likewise eager to be heard while not very interested in listening.

Sometimes the requirement of an auditor for a speaker is disassociated from any desire actually to communicate, to impart any information, for example. Albee's Mommy requires that Daddy pay strict attention, but she desires from him not comprehension of her remarks but simply the sort of rote retention of them which will enable him to repeat her words verbatim. She tries to catch him being inattentive by demanding such a repetition of her remarks. The Professor in Ionesco's The Lesson demands an audience, not a thoughtful pupil actually benefiting from instruction, and he likewise tests her attention by requiring that she parrot him.

Professor:...When we count the sticks, each stick is a unit, miss...What have I just said?
Pupil: "A unit, miss! What have I just said?"¹

¹ Four Plays, p. 57. All subsequent quotations from The Lesson will be from this edition.

Some compulsive talkers would prefer for a conversation to ensue from their remarks. But response or not, audience or not, they keep talking. The Caretaker in Ionesco's The New Tenant, in spite of the Gentleman's inattention, crams the room with words, as the movers afterwards will fill it with furniture. She creates an existence for herself composed of contradictory accounts of other people's lives and imaginary propositions from an uncooperative suitor, her oblivious tenant. The old couple in The Chairs talk to give themselves a spurious identity. Since they do not care about communicating, they can have the same conversation each evening and may even repeat many lines in the course of a single evening. The noise matters, not the words.

The characters in Pinter's The Black and White converse aimlessly, exchanging information which they already know perfectly well. Equally rambling is Winnie's small talk to herself in Beckett's Happy Days. Her garrulous patter rarely elicits a reply from Willie, but she can live on the hope that occasionally she will be heard. Another compulsive talker is Henry in Embers. He must speak to himself in order to obtain his own compliance to the simple orders which enable him to function. Just walking and sitting require the spoken commands to his body "On," "Stop," and "Down."² Apparently he reasons that as long as a voice emerges from his body there must be someone inside it. So he talks to himself constantly, irritating his wife, frightening his daughter. He discloses the compulsion from which he suffers.

²Krapp's Last Tape and Other..., p. 95. All subsequent quotations from Embers will be from this edition.

The need came on me, for someone, to be with me, anyone, a stranger, to talk to, imagine he hears me, years of that, and then, now, for someone who ...knew me, in the old days, anyone, to be with me, imagine he hears me, what I am, now. (p. 100)

Not only is communication infrequent in the previous examples, but it is relatively rare anywhere in the absurdist canon. Twice Ionesco affirms his belief that communication is impossible.³ All the absurdist dramatists, if not the impossibility, then at least the enormous difficulty of a man's communicating with his fellows.

Occasionally communication fails to occur because the characters have, quite simply, nothing to say. Dearth of communicable material is certainly a factor in the lives of the empty-headed characters of The Bald Soprano by Ionesco. They spout such clichés as "Take a circle, caress it, and it will turn vicious." (p. 38) If the clichés are distorted, that makes no difference; they do not convey any meaning anyhow.

Such clichés abound in absurdist plays. Empty ideas are articulated in empty phrases. The couple in Maid to Marry and Winnie in Happy Days vigorously pronounce platitudes in a vain attempt to fill the vacuum in which they live.

Another method of obtaining words for a conversation when there is no matter about which to speak is practiced, again, by the Smiths and Martins in The Bald Soprano. They pad with perfectly self-evident statements. "The ceiling is above, the floor is below." (p. 38) Not exactly scintillating remarks, but something to say!

³ See particularly "Further Notes," Notes and..., p. 227. Also see "Preface," Notes and..., p. 9.

In Frenzy for Two, another Ionesco play, the interminable arguments over the meaning of words likewise reveal how little He and She can find to talk about. And in The Chairs, is there a defect in the orator's ability to communicate, or is the fault not rather in the message itself, which actually contains no conveyable content? Mommy in Albee's The American Dream talks about nothing while Daddy does not talk at all. He has tubes where he used to have tracts. Perhaps he also has tubes in place of brains, for only the greatest effort in his cranium can initiate in him an impulse to speak in order to convey a remark of any import. Perhaps the ultimate symbol for the absence of verbalizable concepts is found in Arrabal's Fando and Lis.

Lis. And I remember, too, that often, when you didn't have anything to say, you used to send me lots of toilet paper so that the letter would be bulky. (pp. 52-53)

Frequently characters who might have something to say purposely avoid saying it. Pinter explains his characters' empty dialogue as an "evasion" of communication.⁴ The halting exchanges in The Caretaker suggest a painful lack of urgency, a total lack of interest in actual communication.

Aston. How do you feel about being one, then?

Davies. Well, I reckon...Well, I'd have to know...you know....

Aston. What sort of....

Davies. Yes, what sort of...you know....

Pause.

⁴"Writing for the Theatre," The New British Drama, ed. Henry Popkin (New York, 1964), p. 579. All subsequent quotations from this work will be from this edition.

Aston. Well, I mean....

Davies. I mean, I'd have to...I'd have to...

Aston. Well, I could tell you....

Davies. That's...that's it...you see...you get my meaning?

Aston. When the time comes....

Davies. I mean that's what I'm getting at, you see.... (p. 44)

Aston and Davies here hide behind their words, just as Mick does with his constant inquiries as to whether Davies has slept well. Flora and Edward in A Slight Ache chatter aimlessly at the breakfast table. Small talk obscures their inner selves, which are unwittingly revealed only when confronted with the obdurate, unbroken silence of the Matchseller. In The Applicant Piffs deliberately avoids eliciting an answer to his questions and Lamb obscures his own supposed attempts to reply. Mr. Kidd in The Room refuses to commit himself to communicating a simple opinion, hedging out of a definite statement of fact: "It'll be dark soon too. But not for a good while yet."⁵ And, as critic John Russell Taylor says, the characters in The Collection and The Lover could "tell the truth about themselves...but of course they don't want to..."⁶

The same avoidance of plain statement of fact, the same fear of direct communication, is found in Ionesco's plays. In The Killer Mother Peep proposes to cause perfect misunderstanding by using doubletalk. Calling war peace and cowardice bravery, she achieves purposeful non-communication. In Amédée Madeleine controls the centers of communication

⁵Two Plays: The Birthday Party and The Room, p. 104. All subsequent quotations from The Room will be from this edition.

⁶Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama (Baltimore, 1963), p. 309.

both of the country and of the marriage. In both instances she abnegates all responsibility by refusing to do her part. Alienated from each other, Amédée and Madeleine are likewise cut off from the rest of the world and are so afraid of instituting new contact with the outside that they refuse a letter addressed to them. Finally forced to venture forth from her apartment, Madeleine talks to herself. Solo conversations are interpolated but remain isolated, not penetrating each other.

Simpson's James Whinby in The Form does not attempt to reach his auditors.

I make no concessions. If my voice is pitched too high to be audible to the average human ear there is nothing to be done but to wait until the average human being has attuned his ear to the pitch of my voice. (p. 124)

The motive for his inflexibility is egoistic, while Pinget's Clope is prompted to undermine his own ability to communicate with another by more humane considerations.

Clope. One can't say what one wants to say.
Pierrot. (Turning his head toward the kiosk.)
The woman who sells papers, what do you say to her?

Clope. That I'm studying grammar. Look. (Takes grammar-book from hut.) All day I tell her the story of subordinate clauses. She can't understand a word. The poor woman's nearly off her head.

Pierrot. Why do you talk to her about that?
Clope. If I told her about myself she'd have been in the padded cell long ago. (p. 62)

Poor Madame Fain not only can make no sense of Clope's grammar, but she sells newspapers in Russian, Chinese, Arabic, Hebrew, foreign tongues of which she and her patrons have not the slightest knowledge. Perhaps it is her purpose also to dispense words which mean nothing in order to

disguise the agonizing meaning which words penetrating to the heart of life's misery would convey.

It is surely in order to forget this misery that certain Beckett characters talk. Purposely refraining from conveying content of import, the tramps frequently chat in order, as Vladimir says, to "pass the time." (p. 44A) Winnie must fill her "happy days" with talk. Hamm prolongs his life with talk. The tramps resort to contradicting each other, insulting each other, talking, talking in order to endure the waiting. Thus language fills the lives of absurdist characters, helping them to mark time, pass time, endure time, obscuring their perceptions of each other and of the absurd.

Talk is accessory to the absurd in still another way. Characters who truly wish to communicate often find that words fail them. Language proves an ineffective vehicle for meaning. Just as Clope cannot keep straight the rules of formal grammar which preoccupy him and finally abandons his grammar book, so do many characters seem to abandon the task of trying to manage their language. Instead they allow language to rule them. When Adamov's Professor Taranne attempts to clear himself of a police accusation, every word he utters indicts him further. In a lighter vein, because the Paradocks notice words and not meaning, they fear they ought to return a telegram and get it fixed; it is worded differently from their last one. Language is an end in itself in this play, A Resounding Tinkle. The characters have a poem or a paragraph instead of a cocktail. The function of words here is to intoxicate, inebriate, certainly not communicate.

Ionesco complains of words "that no longer mean anything,"⁷ and he and the other absurdists dramatize this absence of meaning. Mr. Rooney in Beckett's All That Fall suggests that his wife is "struggling with a dead language." (p. 80) Since words mean nothing, cheering crowds in The Leader can acclaim their hero with "Bravo!" and "Boo!"⁸ The difference in word choice does not alter the sentiment. In Rhinoceros, in a contrapuntal scene, exactly the same lines are exchanged by the Logician and the Old Gentleman as are used by Jean and Berenger. Since words are empty, they suit any thought partially but no thought well.

Inexact language confuses people because each person means something a bit different by the same word. The referent for any word is determined by each individual's experience with an example of that referent. Quite different connotations may therefore inhere in the same word. Hence the Professor in Ionesco's The Lesson can legitimately complain of "languages, which are so diverse in spite of the fact that they present wholly identical characteristics," (p. 68) and Adamov's Roger and Arthur can confuse the rules of ping-pong and tennis because of the misleading nomenclature "table tennis," which suggests to one of them an inappropriate meaning. Even quite ordinary words may cause misunderstandings because of the multiple possible meanings inherent in one word. In The Lesson the Professor uses "count" in two different

⁷"Have I Written Anti-Theatre?" Notes and..., p. 248.

⁸Rhinoceros and Other Plays, p. 113. All subsequent quotations from The Leader will be from this edition.

ways, but his equivocation does not cause the degree of confusion resulting from the following exchange in One Way Pendulum:

Judge:...Does he, for instance, have any negro blood?

Mrs. G.: Well--he has got one or two bottles up in his room, but he doesn't tell me what's in them. (p. 88)

So difficult is language that it may even separate a person from himself. Grandma's attempt to explain her boxes is so misunderstood that she is reduced to not knowing herself what she meant. Krapp does not share the vocabulary used by his former self. Simpson's Author in A Resounding Tinkle is still more schizophrenic.

How close we're getting to the original tonight is anybody's guess....Because I know hardly a word of Portuguese, and of course Portuguese is precisely the language, unfortunately, in which the play--or most of it--came to me. (p. 87)

Surely the modern artist unable to interpret the products of his own imagination is suffering from a quite fundamental breakdown in communication. The struggles waged by Berenger to communicate with the Architect, who exclaims, "We don't talk the same language," (p. 19) and with the Killer, from whom he can elicit neither verbal response nor physical obedience, are other abysmal failures. In fact, when Jack and Roberta are forced to comply with their families' demands that they get to know each other, they decide that the easiest available method is to frustrate verbal communication altogether by designating everything with the word "cat." "It's easier to talk that way..." (p. 109)

Freed from the restrictions of the inadequate language they have inherited, many absurdist characters thus create languages even more inadequate. Odd neologisms creep into conversations. Generally these

are slight distortions of existing words. In Ionesco's Jack "forebears" becomes "bearfors," (p. 83) and in The Future Is in Eggs Jacqueline complains, "Why can't you all peave me in leace!"⁹

Longer units of language may seem nonsense while still retaining the ordinary vocabulary, as in this comprehensible but zany exchange from Arrabal's Picnic on the Battlefield:

Zepo: I've got a fiancée. And if she ever sees the snapshot, she'll say I don't know how to fight a war.
Zapo: No, all you have to do is tell her it isn't you at all, it's a panther.¹⁰

In Kopit's Chamber Music the Woman with Notebook reads a passage strangely devoid of usual syntax and sense.

The meeting was called to order at the usual time all being present for the meeting which was called to order at the usual time in order that those meeting at the usual time in order to meet at the usual time might meet at the usual time and thus be meeting then and be a meeting then and a usual one, too. And thus the meeting having been called to order at the usual time, all being present for the meeting which-- (p. 9)

However, the passage is not sheer nonsense but clearly completely in character, for the speaker is a mental patient who thinks she is Gertrude Stein.

Instead of progressing according to the development of idea, the Steinian passage seems to be controlled by the sounds of the words, one

⁹Rhinoceroa and..., p. 122. All subsequent quotations from The Future Is in Eggs will be from this edition.

¹⁰tr. James Hewitt, Evergreen Review, IV (November-December 1960), 81. All subsequent quotations from Picnic on the Battlefield will be from this edition.

phrase giving birth to another, one rhythmic progression inspiring another. Frequently odd passages in absurdist plays seem executed according to this method. One sound suggests another; "arpita" breeds "turnpits" in Jack (p. 91) and in The Leader the pressing of the crowd suggests the pressing of pants. (p. 113) In still a third Ionesco play, Amédée, the direction of isolated conversation is governed by sound, not sense.

Madeleine: Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! (She walks about the stage in great agitation.)

He must be rearing at every tree!

Soldier: That's what little boys are made of!

Madeleine: (as above) I'd better go and see!

(She puts on her hat.) I can't leave the silly fool all alone; after all, he is my husband!

Mado: You're a wolf!

Soldier: There's a wolf around!

Madeleine: (hat on head) He's a lazy hound!

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! (p. 83)

Other speeches, although not suggested by sound patterns, clearly indicate that words are dominating thoughts. For example, in Waiting for Godot, Estragon is caught in his attempt to ask why Lucky does not put down his bag. The words of the question gradually gain precedence over his interest in getting a reply. Hence, after already having heard the answer, Estragon continues to ask the question. Toward the end of Pinget's Clope the title character delivers a long speech of free association in which the words, clearly directing the content, actually comment on this phenomenon: "...no power over what's been said, no power..." (p. 51)

In Ionesco's Frenzy for Two a verbal frenzy controls the discussion and the arbitrary order of words becomes the subject of debate, underlining

or underlying the disparity in temperatures between this estranged couple:

He:...We never feel hot or cold at the same time.

She: We never feel cold or hot at the same time.

He: No. We never feel hot or cold at the same time. (p. 33)

In the same play She is led by her use of the word "dress" to recall "A famous dress designer proposed to me once." (p. 37) Once more words are directing discourse and the will interferes very little.

Occasionally words control not only the dialogue but apparently the physical universe as well. Albee and Simpson, in The American Dream and One Way Pendulum, kill characters with metaphors which function literally instead of figuratively. In the first play, Grandma explains that the baby died because he cried his heart out. The audience hears, in the second play, that Mr. Gridlake was killed while skiing in the jaws of death. Speculation is that he probably hit his head on the top jaw.

Previous examples have demonstrated that communication fails frequently because language does not properly convey thought. However, the vehicle, although often partially pulverized, rarely disintegrates completely. Perhaps the only examples of complete gibberish in the absurdist canon occur in two plays by Ionesco. In The Chairs, the orator who attempts to deliver the Old Man's message is a mute. He can utter only guttural noises. In The Bald Soprano the dialogue slowly degenerates until it is totally incomprehensible.

Mrs. Smith: Krishnamurti, Krishnamurti, Krishnamurti!

Mr. Smith: The pope elopes! The pope's got no horoscope. The horoscope'a bespoke.

Mrs. Martin: Bazaar, Balzac, bazooka!

Mr. Martin: Bizarre, beaux-arts, brassieres!

Mr. Smith: A, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o,
u, i! (p. 41)

Characters who cannot adequately communicate are shown enduring frequent periods of silence. Plays by Adamov and Pinter indicate many pauses. Beckett often calls for pauses, perhaps setting a record by requesting three hundred seventy-six in the eighty-four pages of Endgame, thirteen on the last page alone. The breakdown in communications in Ionesco's plays is sometimes dramatized by silences. Seven pauses are indicated in five pages in Victims of Duty, and in The Bald Soprano each of twenty consecutive lines is followed by silence. Simpson requests one hundred ninety pauses in the ninety-four pages of One Way Pendulum.

The conversation is stalled in many plays by characters who are either entirely silent or speak rarely. Among these are Simpson's Mr. Brandywine; Beckett's Lucky and Willie; Ionesco's Killer and the mysterious Lady in Victims of Duty; and Pinter's Bert and the Matchseller. The latter's Stanley eventually is reduced to complete silence. Were Kopit to further pursue the story of Jonathan, the stuttering hero of Oh Dad, Poor Dad might appropriately become entirely mute. Other inarticulate characters are, in Victims of Duty, the Detective father who pours out his love for the Choubert son in an internal monologue which Choubert cannot hear, and Amédée, a writer struck dumb by his pen and paper.

A final method of dramatizing the difficulty of communicating employed by every absurdist playwright under consideration involves the simple expedient of depicting people who fail to listen to each other.

In Kopit's Chamber Music each woman lives in an isolated world of her own creation. Adamov's Professor Taranne cannot establish his innocence because no one cares to hear his case; the police simply walk off and leave him alone. Albee's Mommy in The American Dream keeps telling Grandma to be quiet, finally explaining

Old people have nothing to say; and if old people did have something to say, nobody would listen to them. (p. 21)

In Ionesco's plays characters also ignore each other. Nobody listens to another old woman, Grandmother Jack, when she tries to give advice. The Architect in The Killer is preoccupied with his business concerns and ignores Berenger's attempts to share his joy and anguish. And the Gentleman and the Caretaker in The New Tenant fail to hear each other. He is busy with his plans for isolating himself and she is equally involved in her plans for insinuating herself into his life. For all her garrulity, she is just as cut off from him as he is from her. She is alone because she can listen only to herself.

Beckett's Vladimir cannot listen to Estragon's nightmares, and the characters in Play, although immured in adjacent urns, can hear nothing but their own hollow words. It is a pathetic Second Woman who asks

Are you listening to me? Is anyone listening to me? Is anyone looking at me? Is anyone bothering about me at all?¹¹

Nobody will bother about Arrabal's Fando either. He futilely attempts to make contact with Namur, Mitaro and Toso, but they are much too involved in their own arguments to admit Fando to their attention. The threesome

¹¹Play and Two Short Pieces for Radio (London, 1964), p. 17. All subsequent quotations from Play will be from this edition.

listen to each other no better. Their argument consists of three independent trains of thought which fail to intersect. Each stubbornly maintains his position without bothering to consider the opposing views.

Pinget'a Clerk in The Dead Letter absentmindedly repeats a question to which he has just received an answer. He probably has failed to hear not only the reply but also his own previous inquiry. He does not even listen to himself. For the same reason the old men in Pinget's The Old Tune lose the thread of their conversation and produce non-sequiturs.

Cream...Queenie, my favourite, Queenie, a baby girl.

Gorman. Darling name.

Cream. She's so quick for her years you wouldn't believe it, do you know what she came out with to me the other day ah only the other day poor Daisy.

Gorman. And your son-in-law?

Cream. Eh?

Gorman. Oh dear oh dear, Mr. Cream, dear oh dear. (p. 4)

Completely isolated conversations persist in Simpson's The Hole, in which Mrs. Meso and Mrs. Ecto talk and Endo, Soma, and Cerebro talk, the two discussions criss-crossing but never merging. The parties of these two independent units even fail to hear their own companions. Each lives in a separate little world like that private world to which Arthur Groomkirby is remanded in the same dramatist's One Way Pendulum.

Some Pinter characters likewise have difficulty holding the attention of others. In The Room Rose Hudd cannot elicit a response from her husband, and her conversation with Mr. Kidd suggests that he also listens none too well.

Mr. Kidd...She didn't have many babies.

Rose. What about your sister, Mr. Kidd?

Mr. Kidd. What about her?

Rose. Did she have any babies?

Mr. Kidd. Yes, she had a resemblance to my old mum, I think, Taller, of course.

Rose. When did she die then, your sister?

Mr. Kidd. Yes, that's right, it was after she died that I must have stopped counting....

Yes, I was her senior. She had a lovely boudoir. A beautiful boudoir.

Rose. What did she die of?

Mr. Kidd. Who?

Rose. Your sister.

Pause.

Mr. Kidd. I've made ends meet. (p. 103)

In A Night Out, Mother will concern herself with dictating to her son, but not with listening to him. She knows where his tie is, but apparently never hears his remarks about looking for it. She does not know that he is going out although he has told her so repeatedly, and she has fixed supper for him although he told her not to. Her maternal instinct is a purely egoistic one which leaves no room for her son's interests.

Whatever the cause for the failure in attempts to communicate, then, sad isolated souls in absurdist plays futilely try to establish contact with others. These characters may want to be social animals, but many are instead quite lonely. Speaking on the problem of establishing a common ground for communion with another person, Pinter says, "I think there's a common ground all right, but that it's more like a quicksand." ("Writing for the Theatre," pp. 576-577) Pinter's Davies pleads for conversation with Aston, but in spite of any remarks they may exchange they remain alienated, apart, each alone although they are together in the same room.

Other absurdist playwrights complain of solitude. Ionesco asserts "living means alienation," ("The World of Ionesco," p. 480) and Adamov

complains of a "separation"¹² which causes him great suffering, an anguish dramatized by each of the absurdists.

Arrabal's Fando begs for companionship from Lis, but she will not even talk to him. When he tries to make her comfortable, she ignores him. When he kisses her, she ignores him. When he beats his drum and sings her favorite song, she ignores him. His love receives not only no reward, but no notice.

Particularly pitifully lonely is Kopit's Jonathan, who methodically writes a letter to everyone in the telephone book without receiving a single reply. In another play by Kopit, the Cherry Valley Country Club cannot reach the outside world because the whores have cut the telephone wires.

Such symbols of isolation abound in other absurdist plays. Critic Hugh Kenner finds characters in Embers particularly alone.¹³ Other plays by Beckett dramatize this theme of solitude. Vladimir wakes Estragon because he is lonely, and Hamm keeps demanding Clov's company because he is also lonely. Except for this tenuous friendship, in fact, the characters in Endgame are quite isolated. Nag and Nell cannot kiss because their ashcans are too far apart. Hamm is blind. The outside world seems to have died out. A dreary solitude likewise prevails in Act Without Words II. Each man lives in his separate sack. To each

¹²"The Endless Humiliation," tr. Richard Howard, Evergreen Review, II (Spring 1959), 66-67.

¹³Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study (New York, 1961), p. 187.

the other is merely an inert burden to be shouldered, carried, and dropped. Ionesco's Amédée and Madeleine are so cut off from others that a knock on the door terrifies them, and the Berenger of The Killer is so desperate for affection that he proposes to Dany before he has met her. Martin Esslin expresses his inability to comprehend why Ionesco has his Old Man trying to work as a concierge on a deserted island, (p. 99) but the symbol of isolation and the irony of the man's occupation are surely intentional. The Old Man is marooned apart from the society upon which both his happiness and his livelihood depend.

In The Dead Letter Pinget's Levert complains of the impossibility of knowing other people. The barman cannot comprehend Levert's remarks, although, as the speaker says, he is not talking Chinese. But these men cannot share each other's experiences. Real, mutual understanding is impossible. And even mutual dependence cannot long endure. After being abandoned by his friend Pierrot, Clope in turn abandons Madame Flan, in spite of his previous assurances that he would not leave her alone.

EMOTIONAL ATROPHY

Human emotion is obviously quite awry in the absurdist universe. Several areas of emotional atrophy exist in these plays. Friends are not friendly, families do not love and cherish their members, lethargic characters regard causes of happiness and sorrow alike with supreme indifference, and, finally, when emotions are not divorced altogether from human nature, cruelty dominates men and inhumanity dominates men's relationships.

The failure of men to care for one another is forcibly demonstrated by The Caretaker, as its title, of course, suggests. Mick seems categorically to reject the task of being his brother's keeper. He never really gives Davies a chance. But Aston tries to be kind, and Davies simply cannot properly respond to the care with which Aston attempts to provide for his welfare. Davies finds Aston's care inadequate, complaining about the position of his bed, rejecting the gift of shoes because there are no laces, finding fault with everything, flaunting and taunting proffered friendship out of existence. Other Pinter characters encounter similar difficulties in establishing or maintaining meaningful relationships. Ben must kill his friend Gus in The Dumb Waiter. Mark and Pete quarrel in The Dwarfs. Harry loses faith in Bill in The Collection. Edward's attempted befriending of the Matchseller in A Slight Ache ends in disaster.

Other examples not previously cited of unsatisfactory behavior toward friends include: Emanu's betrayal by Topé and denial by Fodere (the former with a kiss and the latter three times, both following

biblical precedent, of course); Estragon's plea for Christ to have mercy on him alone; Jean's rejection of Berenger's friendship during the rhinoceros panic; and the hostile reception which the Berenger in The Killer meets. He and his friend Édouard fight constantly, and they share neither mutual concerns nor mutual affection. Abandoned by Édouard, despised by the Second Policeman, Berenger is left to face the Killer quite alone. His affection for "the human race, but at a distance" (p. 95) has won him not a single dependable close friend.

Lack of affection is especially galling in the intimacy of the family unit. Simpson thus explains his depiction of this problem:

In these plays each man is an island. The whole point about the relationship in the family is that everyone is in fact preoccupied with his own interests and makes very little contact, except superficially, with the other characters...¹

No love is lost between any of Simpson's family members, especially in One Way Pendulum. Kirby Groomkirby and his father are each so absorbed in his own hobby that neither ever speaks to the other. Sylvia is so selfish and lazy that she cannot care about the members of her own family. Poor Aunt Mildred cannot elicit any response to her observations from her sister Mabel, and Sylvia wants to get rid of Aunt Mildred altogether.

In Ionesco's plays, couples are frequently incompatible. Marital boredom is evident in The Chairs, for each old person forces his advances upon a member of the opposite sex. The Madeleine in Victims of Duty

¹Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 222 quotes Simpson from an interview. B.B.C. General Overseas Service, March 6, 1960.

regards it as her duty to torture her husband, and the Madeleine in Amédée is a comic nag. The love of Madeleine and Amédée, which slept in their bedroom when they were first married, died there, killed they know not how, but evidently by sleeping sickness. It is a clammy corpse which stifles them, isolates them, enervates them, and finally drives them apart and out to establish new contacts, but in unpromising places, for he takes to the air and she ends in a bar. Her dead love has so clogged her heart that her "heart-beats seem to shake the whole set" (p. 61) as Amédée tugs the body out of the window. Ionesco also dramatizes hollow family relationships in The Bald Soprano, in which the Smiths decline to kiss, and the Martins, who at first do not recall each other, demonstrate neither excitement nor pleasure at their eventual mutual recognition.

Other unsatisfactory marriages are depicted in Arrabal's The Two Executioners and in Pinter's A Slight Ache. Frances kills her husband, while Flora merely trades hers in on another model. The latter couple are so estranged before the break that she does not even know the topic of the essay which he has been writing for years.

Children and their parents love each other no better. The mothers in Pinter's A Night Out and Kopit's Oh, Dad, Poor Dad love their children as possessions only. Madame Rosepettle has already had a taxidermist stuff her husband's body, which she calls her "favorite trophy," (p. 62) and she obviously regards Jonathan as an object or, at best, a pet. That she regards it as foolish to lavish any affection on such an animal is clear. She indulges in imposing petty privations on Jonathan, removing the tube from the T. V. for example. She does not punish; she petulantly

tyrannizes. Nor is the other family described any more affectionate. The parents have placed their children in the care of a bored babysitter for an indefinite period, merely admonishing her to be sure to "keep the children's names straight," (p. 38) a task at which Madame Rosepettle herself, with only one charge, has proved a dismal failure.

Family relationships seem all the more hollow in Albee's The American Dream because of the names given the characters. Mommy and Daddy have no child and Grandma has no grandchild. Barren and sterile, Mommy and Daddy are not parents, nor are they loving children. In The Sandbox they cart Grandma to the beach and dump her out to die. They hire a musician to play sentimental music, not at the funeral, but at the death, for it "pays" to die well.² Mommy fakes just enough grief, but leaves the beach and the corpse (who has thoughtfully buried herself in the sand) quite cheerfully the next morning.

The love of courting couples seems to be equally shammed. Daisy abandons Berenger in Rhinoceros moments after she has promised not to. In The Leader, another play by Ionesco, love is professed with still less foundation. This is the entire love-scene.

Young Lover: Forgive me, Madame, or should
I say Mademoiselle?

Girl-Friend: I beg your pardon, I'm afraid
I don't happen to know you!

Young Lover: And I'm afraid I don't know
you either!

Girl-Friend: Then neither of us knows each
other.

²The Zoo Story and The Sandbox (New York, 1960), p. 39. All subsequent quotations from The Sandbox will be from this edition.

Young Lover: Exactly. We have something in common. It means that between us there is a basis of understanding on which we can build the edifice of our future.

Girl-Friend: That leaves me cold, I'm afraid.

(She makes as if to go.)

Young Lover: Oh, my darling, I adore you.

Girl-Friend: Darling, so do I!

(They embrace.)

Young Lover: I'm taking you with me, darling. We'll get married straightaway. (p. 110)

As for Kopit's Madame Rosepettle, she loves the Commodore like a cat loves its mouse. A more predatory passion may hardly be conceived.

Family members, friends, lovers, and strangers, all seem prone to an enervating indifference which precludes the possibility of any emotional response. Absurdist characters frequently are so well insulated that powerful emotion cannot penetrate. Their hearts not only will not short circuit, but they well may not generate any current at all. Ionesco attributes the apallingly empty lives of the Smiths and the Martins to their lack of passion.³ The Martins, for example, are so excited over their meeting again that they fall asleep.

Insensitive to causes for joy or enthusiasm, absurdist characters are still less responsive to situations which should elicit reactions of grief, pity or fear. Sometimes responses to suffering are so inappropriate as to approach the psychotic. Certainly the mirth displayed in Endgame by Nagg and Nell at the thought of their own dismemberment is at least most eccentric. Other Beckett characters, Vladimir and Estragon,

³Richard N. Coe, Eugene Ionesco (New York, 1961), p. 47, quoting Ionesco from "La Tragedie du langage," Spectacles, No. 2 (July, 1958), p. 5.

while more sensitive to their own abject conditions, listen to Pozzo's cries for help for some time while they chat. In plays by Simpson and Ionesco, even the deaths of others leave men indifferent. Simpson's Mrs. Paradock in A Resounding Tinkle casually offers knives to her guests in case they wish to slash each other to shreds. And the Groomkirbys demonstrate little concern at the possibility that their son might be sentenced to death.

Lethargy at the deaths of others is prevalent among Ionesco's characters. In The Future Is in Eggs Jack cannot shed a single tear when his grandfather dies. He, in Frenzy for Two, finds insignificant the three murders he has just seen, certainly nothing for which to interrupt his semantic squabble with his wife. Marie in The Lesson reprimands her master after he has knifed his fortieth victim, but she has not bothered to prevent the murder. Amédée recalls having heard a drowning woman screaming for help. But since the fish were biting he just kept on fishing. In Victims of Duty the Lady sits in indifferent, impassive silence while Choubert is bizarrely tortured and the Detective is murdered. Nor does Madeleine move to prevent these atrocities, but merely murmurs "It's such a pity it had to happen in our flat!" (p. 165)

Indignation is an emotion rarely experienced by absurdist men and women. Egoism precludes indignation at injustices inflicted upon others and insures indifference toward all but personal welfare. Berenger in The Killer finds himself alone in his concern for the lives of others and his impatience to catch the murderer. Some strange burden in a briefcase seems to inhibit every other character, undercutting any potential humane inclinations. Only Berenger expresses enthusiasm for the city, impatience

to catch the Killer, grief at Dany's death. Édouard finds him childish and the Architect judges that he is too emotional. Each damns Berenger for his fundamental concern with the welfare of others. Not the least indifferent is the Killer himself, who shrugs off queries about his motives and appears nonchalant even with knife raised.

Other characters suffer from emotional lethargy. The Gentleman dispassionately remonstrates with the Caretaker and the Furniture Movers in The New Tenant. His tone is devoid of feeling. His body is completely calm. Sympathy is no part of the composition of Arrabal's Jeanne in Professor Taranne. She does not appear to care about her brother being fired by the Belgian university. And Albee's Grandma reproaches Mommy and Daddy for their indifference. "You don't have any feelings, that's what's wrong with you," she admonishes in The American Dream. (p. 13) And truly they do seem to find emotion out of place in their sterile lives. They accept a son only after having murdered his emotional potential by killing his twin, and they hypocritically avow their love for Grandma while juxtaposing a perfectly composed forecast of her death.

Mommy...Grandma doesn't know what she means.

Daddy. She knows what she says, though.

Mommy. Don't you worry about it; she won't know that soon. I love Grandma. (p. 11)

Equally as culpable as the indifference of some characters is another inappropriate emotional reaction. Precisely because they lack compassion, because they cannot feel pity, they brutalize others with excruciating cruelty and they sadistically enjoy accounts of the suffering of others. Brutality may be physical or it may be a more subtle combination of

depriving others of pleasure and verbally taunting them.

Every kind of violence is present in Pinter's plays. In The Room Bert knocks Riley down and then savagely kicks his head against the stove. In The Caretaker, although Davies does pull a knife, primarily the violence is done to mind and soul. Mick intimidates Davies. Davies, already hostile to all sorts of "aliens," turns against his benefactor. Davies taunts Aston about his insanity and actually tries to have him evicted from his own room. Aston, in turn, listens unresponsively to the wretched Davies' plea for mercy. The actions of all three are forms of the cruelty man inflicts on man. Further evidence of inhumane treatment is offered in The Birthday Party, in which Stanley opposes the gruelling inquisition of McCann and Goldberg with physical violence. Stanley's tormentors have merely suggested, "Stick a needle in his eye," (p. 55) but Stan actually does resort to strangling Meg and kicking Goldberg in the stomach.

Physical blows are likewise showered on the characters in Waiting for Godot. Lucky kicks Estragon, Estragon returns the kick with interest, Vladimir slugs Pozzo, and Pozzo whips Lucky. In Endgame there is actual joy in the knowledge that one has brought misery to others. Hsamm, afraid that he has not caused Clov to suffer enough, is relieved by Clov's assurance that the fears are groundless.

Grotesque methods of murder are planned and executed. Simpson's Kirby Groomkirby tells his victims a joke and then, while they're still laughing, smashes their skulls with an iron bar. And the women in Kopit's Chamber Music plan to massacre and devour the men's ward. Amelia Earhart comments, "Well, I say if you can't have a moosehead on the wall, a good

man'll do just fine." (p. 27) And in Oh, Dad, Poor Dad the nursery rhyme jingle in Madame Rosepettle's speech enhances, rather than disguises, the vicious significance: "You desire me, with love in your heart. While I, my dear Commodore...desire your heart." (p. 64) She would tear out his heart without the slightest compunction; doubtless she has a trophy case full already.

Even children are not safe from mutilation. The baby in The American Dream has been slowly dismembered (Grandma is only threatened with the loss of her television, her false teeth and her freedom), and in Jack Mother Jack reminds Jack

I held you on my knees and pulled out your
cute little baby teeth, and tore off your
toe nails so as to make you bawl like an
adorable little calf. (p. 81)

Other Ionesco characters take pleasure in the grotesquely cruel. Jack adores Roberta's story about a horse burning alive. In The New Tenant the Caretaker laughs at her tale of a man brutally beating his wife. The Stout Gentleman in The Painting forces Alice, at gunpoint, to do things very painful for her, such as kneeling with rheumatism. In The Killer the Concierge mistreats her dog several times. Its off-stage yelp is a simple refrain of misery gratuitously inflicted. Also assaulted and insulted without motive in this play is the Soldier who is victimized by the police. Still another victim of sadism is Choubert, who, among other indignities suffered in Victims of Duty, is forced to masticate bark, in the process breaking his teeth and slashing and slicing his gums.

Arrabal's characters are no less cruel and/or miserable. Fando and Lis torture each other; he tortures her body while she racks his soul. He beats her because she cannot crawl while handcuffed. She, in retaliation, or perhaps simply inexplicably, refuses to listen to him, speak to him, or admire him. Their mutual cruelty is no greater than Frances' solitary savagery in The Two Executioners. She rubs salt and vinegar in her husband's wounds and then soothes them with scratches, torturing her son Maurice almost as viciously as she does her husband by forcing the boy to listen to his father's agonized cries and the sound of the whip. Beatings also batter the inhabitants of The Automobile Graveyard. An unseen man strikes the baby. Milos twice slaps Dilla. The police beat Emanu before crucifying him. In Orison Lilbé gloats at the tale of an earlier Crucifixion, "pleased" at what He suffered.⁴ What a lot of pleasure is available in the absurdist universe to those who thrive on the agony of others. It is a tortured world indeed.

⁴Arrabal, Four Plays, tr. Barbara Wright (London, 1962), p. 18. All subsequent quotations from Orison will be from this edition.

INTRODUCTION TO PART II

There is no sharp distinction between those plays herein deemed just within the tradition of the absurd and other plays excluded because they seem just beyond the outer fringes of absurdist plays. A few plays by Max Frisch, Friedrich Durrenmatt, Michel de Ghelderode, Jack Gelber, Gunter Grass, James Saunders, Jean Tardieu, and other dramatists might profitably be compared with and contrasted to the plays treated in this study. Some of Edward Albee's plays not mentioned in these pages might be examined for absurdist themes and methods. Affinities with and distinctions between Pirandello, Anouilh, and Giraudoux, on the one hand, and the absurdist, on the other, might prove fruitful. It is most important for each critic to make his own selection and respect the choices of other critics, since the absurdist group is not really an autonomous movement or school and the label is not theirs by their own choice but is always imposed from without.

However, each critic should likewise exercise judgment in assembling his own contingent of absurdist, and some question may be raised as to the validity of the classification if no basis for the selection is demonstrated. Just as a too rigid insistence on the inclusion or exclusion of plays on the fringes of the absurdist group is fruitless hair splitting and therefore ill advised, so is an equally poor approach that which shoves any avant-garde playwright or unorthodox philosopher into the absurdist ranks. Some plays clearly will be misunderstood if labelled absurdist. The thematic analysis herein offered is particularly useful if it provides a basis of contrast with plays and playwrights who have

been erroneously labelled absurdist.

In his book The Theatre of the Absurd Martin Esslin includes Jean Genet as a playwright of the absurdist movement. He also mentions that Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre are philosophically in agreement with the absurdists and are distinguished from absurdist playwrights only by differences in technique. Other critics classify all three as absurdists. On the basis of the catalogue of absurdist themes heretofore presented, the plays of all three of these dramatists are demonstrably alien to the metaphysical premises of the theatre of the absurd.

In the examination of Jean Genet, the analysis of themes possibly absurdist provides a useful approach. But in evaluating the attitude of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre toward the absurd, a more useful expedient is that of establishing what each of these philosophers does believe in order to quickly suggest a contrast with the already elaborated metaphysics of the absurdists.

PART II: THE CONTRAST OF ABSURDIST THEMES WITH THOSE
OF THREE PLAYWRIGHTS WRONGLY CALLED ABSURDIST

Jean Genet

Esslin considers four playwrights as most representative of the absurdist movement. Others he discusses briefly in a later section on parallels and proselytes, but to each of these four, Ionesco, Beckett, Adamov, and Genet, he accords a prominent position and to each he devotes an entire chapter. Adamov's early plays seem clearly to suit Esslin's purposes, but in his most recent work Adamov has repudiated his absurdist philosophy and embraced a Marxism postulating the possibility of constructive action. His works have received few performances and little critical attention outside of France. Only three of his plays had been printed in English translation as of 1966. Ionesco and Beckett, both more extensively performed and translated than Adamov, clearly deserve the attention accorded them by Esslin, and each is frequently discussed as an absurdist by other critics and reviewers.

An odd circumstance may be noted in connection with Esslin's inclusion of Genet. In May, 1960, Esslin published an article entitled "The Theatre of the Absurd" in the Tulane Drama Review (IV, 4, 3-15). This article states that Esslin is "completing" his book. Discussed in the article are Adamov, Ionesco, and Beckett. Again in February, 1961, Esslin published "Pinter and the Absurd" in Twentieth Century (CLXIX, 1008, 176-185). An editor's note informs the reader that this article is an extract from Esslin's forthcoming book. Esslin discusses Pinter's plays in the light of "the theatre of Beckett, Ionesco, and Arthur Adamov,

the Theatre of the Absurd." (176) Again, there is no mention of Genet, and this omission occurs in the year of Esslin's publication of the book. Is it possible that inclusion of Genet in the opening pages of his book was an after-thought, a last minute decision made in the final months before printing?

Certain it is that one other critic writing in the same year saw fit to include Genet as one of the absurdists whose plays "give birth to a new literary genre."¹ Whether the article and the book were written independently of each other or whether one influenced the other is not clear. But quite clearly the inclusion of Genet in each has embarrassed some critics. The reviewer of Esslin's book for the Times Literary Supplement speaks of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, and Pinter, and discusses other less prominent dramatists, but he does not mention Genet at all.²

Some critics of Genet ignore his supposed affinity with Ionesco and Beckett, but some others articulate their dismay. Critics Joseph N. Calarco and Bernard Dort distinguish Genet from the absurdists.³

¹Pierre Melese, "The Avant Garde Theater in France," Theatre Annual, XVIII (1961), 6.

²"Dreams of Reason," Times Literary Supplement, LXI (August 3, 1962), 556. For other omissions of Genet from discussions of absurdists see Jacque Guicharnaud, "Forbidden Games: Arrabal," Yale French Studies, 29 (Spring-Summer 1962), 116; William I. Oliver, "Between Absurdity and the Pyswright," Educational Theatre Journal, XV (October 1963), 227; Edith Melcher, "The Use of Words in Contemporary French Theater," Modern Language Notes, LXXVII (December 1962), 476.

³Joseph N. Calarco, "Vision without Compromise: Genet's The Screens," Drama Survey, IV (Spring 1965), 44-45. All subsequent quotations from this essay will be from this source; "A Comprehensive Realism," World Theatre, XIV (March-April 1965), 114-115.

Thomas B. Markus classifies Genet, not as an absurdist, but with what is to him a more verbal group of French dramatists including Audiberti, Schéhadé, and Vauthier. Likewise, Germaine Brée, in a cultural affairs booklet designed to explain French drama to the American public, links Adamov, Ionesco, and Beckett, and relegates Genet to the company of an entirely different group similar to that in which he is placed by Markus.⁴ Joseph H. McMahon notes that Genet "risks finding himself in the wrong category, lined up with the prophets of or witness to the absurd..." and adds, "He is none of these..."⁵ McMahon regards Genet as bearing affinities to Racine, Shakespeare, Dante, and Balzac--but not Ionesco and Beckett! Robert Brustein finds Genet "wrongly classed with the absurdist,"⁶ preferring to call him an Artaudian and a prophet of revolt. If one must bundle Genet into some category, Brustein's might do, as would this broader classification: "Genet...is less an absurdist than a perversely erotic symbolist poet of the theater..."⁷

Many critics have opposed the over-simplification required to stamp Genet with the absurdist label, but not one critic has systematically examined the reasons for his resistance to this procedure. If one may

⁴"Jean Genet: The Theatre of the Perverse," Educational Theatre Journal, XIV (October 1962), 209; French Theatre Today: 1950-1960 (New York), p. 4.

⁵The Imagination of Jean Genet (New Haven, 1963), p. 200.

⁶The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama (Boston, 1964), p. 377.

⁷"Off-Broadway Reckoning," Time, LXXXI (February 15, 1963), 63-64.

assume that adamant opponents of the intentional fallacy would permit some consideration of a playwright's life and avowed intentions if mixed with a sampling of the works themselves, then perhaps a satisfactory starting point for an appraisal of Genet's metaphysics may be found in Lionel Abel's objection to classifying Genet as an absurdist. Holding that Genet is close to the Elizabethans, comparable to Marlowe but "never" to Kafka, Abel accuses Esslin of ignoring Genet's life in assuming that Genet regards the world as absurd.⁸

And Genet's life is the source of much dismay in the conventional world of Piccadilly or Park Avenue. So outlandish is it, in fact, that critics might well judge from superficial examination that any man subjected to such an existence must regard life as absurd. A foundling, called a thief by his foster parents at ten, sent to a reformatory at fifteen for stealing, feeling rejected by society and rejecting it in turn, this is the Jean Genet whom Sartre describes in his Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr. Sartre traces Genet's career as beggar, petty thief, professional burglar, deserter, pederast, prostitute, and stool pigeon. Sartre discerns in Genet one predominant pattern, a series of conscious decisions for degradation, humiliation, and evil. Sartre finds Genet an existential hero, a man purposefully creating his essence by consistent choices calculated to canonize him as a saint of evil. A natural victim, a bastard, a female homosexual despised even by his lovers, Genet has turned the tables on life by exalting his liabilities to the rank of assets, by proclaiming that his sins are virtues.

⁸Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form (New York, 1963), p. 145.

Not immoral, not amoral, but proclaiming an inverse ethic, Genet asserts his existential freedom to create his own character.

Perhaps Sartre reads his own philosophy into Genet's career. Perhaps what he regards as Genet's existential will is simple masochism. But that some strange force (call it anything appropriate, perhaps Poe's imp of the perverse) has driven Genet to consistently degrade himself is obvious to any reader of Genet's "autobiography" The Thief's Journal and his onanistic fantasy Our Lady of the Flowers. Written for the sexual titillation provided by the book's masochistic eroticism and for the pleasure of breaking prison rules and stubbornly persisting in the composition even after the confiscation of his first manuscript, the second book subjects its hero, or heroine as Genet regards "her," Louis Culafroy (Divine) to such intoxicating indignities as wearing her dentures as a crown to castigate her vanity and choosing to confess a crime when imminent release is probable. Another projection of himself, Darling Daintyfoot, a male queen, is a stool pigeon so that he will be totally rejected even by his criminal associates.

Divine and Darling expose themselves to whatever censure they can, and Our Lady of the Flowers is another sort of exposure, a sexual exposure, something like undressing in public. The book was first published in 1943, before Genet could have been influenced by Sartre. It is pure unadulterated perverted and perverse Genet, thumbing his nose at the decent society from which he was excluded. Other playwrights have had unsavory backgrounds or have indulged in generally unfavorably regarded moral practices, but only Genet has bragged of his conduct, flaunting his behavior at the priggish public in his Thief's Journal. Interesting as

more than mere pornography, this book recounts two incidents particularly illustrative of Genet's character. Ever willfully eager to subject himself to contempt, Genet insists on being paid off in front of the associates in theft whom he has sold to the police. Loyalty to a fellow criminal would be a vestige of an already rejected code of ethics. The other revealing act is Genet's discomfort in Nazi Germany, a country in which his own inverted standards prevail. Genet hurries back to France where he can feel alone once more. He lives in order to be rejected. Or he is rejected in order to live, to exist, unique and isolated.

Sartre seems to regard Genet as an archetypal rebel, paradoxically torn between disgusting people, forcing them to persecute and despise him, and tantalizing people, converting them to his espousal of evil.⁹ He does not entirely succeed in either attempt, if such are his aims. Esslin inspects Genet's career and plays and he concludes that Genet joins Ionesco, Beckett and Adamov in experiencing the same "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition..." (p.xix) He judges, perhaps with undue sentimentality in his evaluation of the evidence, that Genet's plays express "his own feeling of helplessness and solitude when confronted with the despair and loneliness of man..." (pp. 140-141)

⁹Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr, tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1963), especially pages 486 & 498. All subsequent quotations from this book will be from this edition.

That Esslin's personal reaction to Genet's fictive world is one of horror and pity is obvious. That Genet's own reaction to his work is now chuckling detachment, now sordid fascination, is evident from the writer's tone and from his statement of his avowed intent: "It [Evil] is the only thing that has sufficient power to communicate enthusiasm to my pen, a sign, in this case, of my fundamental allegiance."¹⁰ Critics David I. Grossvogel, Bamber Gascoigne, and Wallace Fowlie all accept Genet's own evaluation of his ethical and metaphysical stance as being in praise of evil.¹¹ Another who apparently agrees with Genet is Ionesco. This absurdist feels that Beckett is a kindred spirit and expresses his admiration for this fellow dramatist in several of the essays printed under the title Notes and Counter Notes. That Beckett somewhat reciprocates Ionesco's esteem is likely, since he took the trouble to write a director in Dublin and recommend a play by Ionesco for production before any of Ionesco's plays had been performed in English.¹² Of course, all absurdistes need not actively admire each other, but it seems unlikely that one would find another positively shocking. Yet this was precisely Ionesco's reaction to Genet's play The Blacks. Herbert Blau reports

¹⁰David I. Grossvogel, Four Playwrights and a Postscript (New York, 1962), p. 138, quoting Genet's speech, "The Criminal Child." All subsequent quotations from this book will be from this edition.

¹¹Ibid., p. 172; Twentieth-Century Drama (London, 1962), pp. 51-52; "The Case of Jean Genet," Commonweal, LXXIII (October 28, 1960), 111.

¹²Alan Simpson, Beckett and Behan and a Theatre in Dublin (London, 1962), pp. 19-20.

that Ionesco walked out on the opening night's performance. "When I asked him why, he said he never realized it before, 'mais je suis un Blanc.'"13 A "black" for Genet is any man dedicated to serving the dark powers, and a "white" is one, like Ionesco, who is dedicated to protesting this and every other subversion of the dignity of man. A sharper dichotomy could not easily exist.

Genet's prose and plays are sensational. His latest work, The Screens, more than any of his other plays, regales the audience with smut. Sexual in part, of course, what with all the whores and soldiers, and sporting a highly erotic scene between Leila and a pair of her husband's trousers, it is, however, instead primarily scatological, so much so that one student has retitled it "Six Characters in Search of a Bathroom." The play boasts a passage on bowels to be delivered, at Genet's direction, "lyrically."¹⁴ Soldiers fart in their dying comrade's face in order to give him a whiff of France. Women rush to a funeral in order to enjoy the flies there. Chigha with her tongue "seems to be licking with relish the snot she pretends is flowing from her nose." (p. 40) Several characters find excrement delightful. When Chiga leaves momentarily to urinate, Genet's purpose seems to be nothing but the exploitation of shock value. Contrast Vladimir's retreat in Waiting for Godot. There Beckett depicts life filled with elementary

¹³"The Popular, the Absurd, and the Entente Cordiale," Tulane Drama Review, V (March 1961), 147.

¹⁴tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1962), p. 99. All subsequent quotations from The Screens will be from this edition.

agony and stresses Estragon's pleasure at Vladimir's suffering. In that play, by implication, pain is pitied and cruelty condemned. But in The Screens, filth seems to be relished much for its own sake.

The absurdists chastise, satirize, and analyze man encountering the absurd. Genet's gifts are not expended in the same way. In fact, Sartre asserts that Genet does not find the world absurd.

Contemporary writers think they have discovered the absurdity of the world and of man in the world. Genet is at the opposite pole of their conception...his optimism passionately rejects the absurdity of the universe. (pp. 255-256)

Thus, not surprisingly, Genet's themes are not those of the absurdists. Sartre believes that crime is his major theme, (p. 485) whereas most other critics focus on his fascination with the tension between illusion and reality and frequently concentrate some attention on his rebellious posture. Instead of analyzing these themes in isolation it is more appropriate for this comparative study to examine Genet's attitude toward each of the major absurdist themes. Never does Genet stress any of these topics, but, whenever he gives one some notice, his attitude is the antithesis of the absurdist stance.

Obviously in contrast to the absurdist ethic are Genet's values. The absurdist plays have been demonstrated to be critical of false or shifting values. Genet's characters, like their creator, espouse evil. Most blatantly pernicious are the ethics practiced and praised by the sympathetic Arabs in The Screens. Especially striking is the invocation to evil recited by the dead Kadidja.

Evil, wonderful evil, you who remain when all goes to pot, miraculous evil, you're going to help us. I beg of you, evil, and I beg you standing upright, impregnate my people. (p. 97)

There follows a powerful black mass in which she asks each member of her congregation, "What have you done for evil to prevail?"

In a world dominated by the forces of evil, characters cultivate hatred and luxuriate in masochism. Hatred is most explicitly eulogized in The Blacks, in which Archibald expostulates with Village to nurture this emotion toward his own father. In the same play, Felicity feeds the corpse, which is the symbol of the hatred borne the white race, to insure that the body will not diminish in size. Contrast this corpse to that of Amédée's dead love, a corpse which constantly grows despite all of his efforts to prevent that. The substitution of indifference for active affection is deplored by the absurdists, whereas indifference in the place of hatred is judged culpable by Genet.

Masochism is less evident than hatred in The Blacks, being superseded in this play by the sadism of both races and being truly evident here perhaps only in Diouf's penchant for self abasement. But masochism is an inextricable component of the Judge's personality in The Balcony, causing him to humiliate himself by crawling on his belly and licking the Thief's shoes. And masochism is likewise predominant in Saïd and Leila, hero and heroine of The Screens. Saïd wants to be sad and will hurt himself if no one else will oblige him by doing so. Leila proclaims, in a flourish of romantic self dramatization,

I want to arrive in jail with my mug black
and blue, my hair sticky with tears and snot,
and my body all crooked because of a smashed
rib. (p. 66)

Several other tenets of the absurdists are missing from Genet's plays. There is no abhorrence of cruelty in his diabolic ethic, and there is no assertion of the irrationality of reason. Far from postulating a world without meaning or purpose, Genet allows his characters to impose meaning on life by asserting their freedom to choose and their capacity to execute their decisions. Such action is possible through anti-social revolt or ritual rebellion.

It is therefore no accident that Genet's heroes are murderers, thieves, whores, traitors, Arabs and Negroes, all social outcasts whom he admires and who assert their ability to act by extending their wills to achieve any loathesome extremity. In The Maids Solange is ecstatic at the thought of being executed as Claire's murderer. In The Balcony Carmen is proud of being a prostitute, and so are the whores in The Screens. In The Blacks the title characters so loathe the idea of being respectable and therefore resembling their white victims that Village and Virtue may not marry and thus legitimize their relationship. Archibald reminds the others, "Bear one thing in mind: we must deserve their reprobation and get them to deliver the judgment that will condemn us."¹⁵ And Snow feels that Village should have been motivated to kill the white woman in order to emphasize.

¹⁵tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1958), p. 30. All subsequent quotations from The Blacks will be from this edition.

the fact that he's a scarred, smelly, thick-lipped, snub-nosed Negro, an eater and guzzler of Whites and all other colors, a drooling, sweating, belching, spitting, coughing, farting goat-fucker, a lick of white boots, a good-for-nothing, sick, oozing oil and sweat... (p. 27)

Genet's championing of the perverse flouting of acceptable moral standards in The Blacks backfired. Critics hailed the play as a milestone in racial drama, and white spectators likewise applauded for the wrong reasons, hesitating to express their discomfort because it would not do to be displeased at a play which seems to demand civil and human rights for a suppressed people. Those who responded to the play as racial propaganda reacted, not to Genet's play, but to his supposed subject and their own consciences. For the play is altogether a different matter. In a headnote to the printed script, Genet writes, "One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?" (p. 3) A black, as Ionesco realized with repugnance at that premiere which he could not stomach, is not necessarily a Negro. To Genet, a black is an out-cast, and he is one who cultivates his amoral propensities. And the white that was suddenly revealed to Ionesco in his soul was not the color of his skin but the temper of his character. The Negro in The Blacks need not have been born dark. There is blacking available to give pigmentation to his skin--and evil in quantity with which to color his soul.

Probably because this play was so misunderstood, Genet dramatized the same theme of revolt against all that is conventional in his next play, The Screens. Here there can be no danger of anyone missing the point. Genet is not justifying the Arabs as acceptable by the moral

standards of the "just." By act and by word these Arabs proclaim their intention of meriting "the world's contempt." (p. 101) These characters make a fetish of being loathesome, whether the quality is acquired or inherited. Leila is such an epitome of ugliness that she wears a black hood throughout the play with holes only for her eyes and mouth. Such features are too repugnant to be depicted on the stage. Leila's husband Saïd and his mother are thieves, rejected by their own Arab village, which is in turn, of course, reviled by the French colonists. This family wears theft like a coat of arms and even teaches its chickens to steal. The Mother is rejected not only by the living but by the dead as well, and her son and daughter-in-law are such outcasts that when they die they cannot join the other dead but must simply disappear. That all three have merited such distinctions is clear. Leila is proud of being a traitor's wife. The Mother is shamed only by the ignominy of an inadvertently noble deed; she ruins her reputation by accidentally strangling a French soldier and being subsequently revered as a hero by the Arabs. Angry at this unintentional compromise with virtue, the dead Mother urges the still living Saïd, who risks dying as a martyr to the French instead of as a traitor to every cause,

Make a getaway. Don't let yourself be conned...Don't serve either of them, don't serve any purpose whatever. I think they're going to make up a song about you. The words have been written. People are humming it. It's in the air. (She screams.) Saïd, squelch the inspiration, shit on them! (p. 199)

Of course, such anti-social creatures do not suffer the torment of those few absurdist characters who consciously struggle to communicate.

Nor do they engage in any of the games of non-communication in which other absurdist characters indulge. Genet's characters, cultivating hatred, forcing others to dislike them, choose isolation. Grossvogel finds in Genet's plays praise of "splendid remoteness" (p. 172) and Joseph N. Calcarco judges that for Genet, man's dilemma "is not in his loneliness, but rather in the fact that he is not lonely enough." (p. 45)

And just as death for Leila and Saïd is the supreme achievement of isolation, so death is infinitely desirable rather than the abhorred manifestation of the absurd. Death is desirable dissolution or banishment for Leila and Saïd. Even for Kadidja and the rest, it is merely a casual, amusing incident, nothing to "make such a fuss about" once it is experienced. (p. 141) The Queen in The Blacks vows that she is heading for death "voluntarily, with a sneaking happiness." (p. 116) In The Maids Solange and Claire both welcome the chance to die. Sartre even believes that Genet himself has a similar death wish. (See pp. 4 & 334)

If death does not seem to dismay Genet's characters, neither does the uncertainty which abounds in the absurdist universe hound them. Religion, far from erratic in The Blacks, is simply the worship of the enemy.

For two thousand years God has been white.
 He eats on a white tablecloth. He wipes
 his white mouth with a white napkin. He
 picks at white meat with a white fork.
 (A pause.) He watches the snow fall. (p. 24)

Identity, far from unstable in Genet's plays, may be created by the character's free choices, and, hence, no man need be a nonentity. Saïd and the whore Warda, for example, both create identities by seeking

disgrace. Each fears the extinction of a carefully cultivated reputation only when, in Saïd's case, the Cadi tries to acquit him, and when, in Warda's case, other women begin to greet her at the butcher's and grocer's while she is a nurse for the Red Cross. But neither need worry, for both after death are hated for what they really were.

Genet is a rebel, and his characters hardly seem oppressed by forces of the absurd. Camus and Sartre are also rebels. Although, unlike Genet, they do acknowledge the absurd at work in the world, they both assert man's ability to transcend its power. Thus Esslin is perhaps too hasty in attributing to Sartre, a self-proclaimed existentialist, and Camus, often associated by others with existential questions, the same philosophy as that dramatized by the absurdists. (pp. xix-xx)

Albert Camus

Camus was much concerned with the absurd as it may reveal itself to man. But the absurdists are glum about the sorry plight of men either enmeshed unawares in the toils of an absurd universe or consciously struggling without avail against an unyielding adversary. Camus, on the other hand, manages to surmount the absurd and emerges with a glimpse of victory in many cases and always of the possibility of joy in the struggle.

Esslin quotes a definition of the absurd derived from only the opening pages of an early work, untempered by other quotations from the same essay and by passages from the later and much altered works of the developing Camus. "The Myth of Sisyphus" was completed in 1941 and published the following year. Many strikingly different prose works issued

from his pen in the subsequent two decades until his death in 1960. His plays also postdate the essay. While Camus' Caligula was first written in 1938, this early play was thereafter revised in both 1945 and 1958, and his other plays, The Misunderstanding, State of Siege, and The Just Assassins were written in 1942-43, 1948, and 1949 respectively.

But, before examining the developments in Camus' philosophy after the composition of "The Myth of Sisyphus," it is well to examine this essay in some detail. It is unquestionably the source of many absurdist tenets, whether these were actually derived from the essay itself or not. It is a veritable handbook of absurdist premises, although even this single essay progresses beyond the absurdist position. The following passage, not to be construed as Camus' final thoughts on the absurd, is quoted by Esslin:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But...in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.¹

Camus then proceeds to detail his understanding of the absurd as of that date. One may recognize the absurd in multiple aspects of a world abounding with strange phenomena, a world in which men are minute, negligible, compressed to nothing by the density of inhuman

¹tr. Justin O'Brien, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays (New York, 1961), p. 5. All subsequent quotations from this essay will be from this edition.

matter with which they are surrounded. The world easily obliterates puny human attempts to impose meaning on its hostile and foreign surface. Turning from wind and rock to the mass of humanity seething on this alien planet, Camus finds that people also are strange and that even a man's mate may be blindingly revealed to him as a stranger. When others do not horrify Camus by their cruelty, they may appear silly and mechanical. Even one's own reflection in a mirror may be alarming.

Perhaps worst of all in this chaotic void is man's thirst for some principle which, by imposing order, may cancel the absurd. Man searches futilely for meaning, and the search, because prompted by his compelling awareness of the need to search, is agonizing.

This world itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. (p. 16)

Attempted action may be futile. Sisyphus struggles to the summit with his rock only to watch his burden again plunge down to its initial position at the foot of the mountain. He must descend and once more push the rock upward, knowing full well that his labor will culminate in yet another plummet of the rock down the mountain and yet another purposeless struggle to the summit. For Sisyphus

the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth. (p. 89)

Thus, as Camus sees life, man experiences the absurd when he loves life but expects his imminent destruction, when he desires the good but experiences evil, when he strives for union with others but

endures isolation, when he aches for certainty but knows only doubt, when he grasps meaning but must watch it dissolve into chimera or riddle, when he erects order or a facade of logic but can only stare helplessly as the merest whisper of a breeze from Chaos topples the structure of his life's work in a moment.

The absurd hero is a twig attempting to weather a cataclysm. It is this attempt to withstand the absurd which both renders the absurd extant and renders the little man a hero. But heroic resistance depends first upon perception of the absurd. The absurd hero must be constantly conscious of absurdity, of the paradox from which his life draws both its mortal finite limits and its immortal infinite longings.

The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. (p. 44)

Camus' philosophy throughout the remainder of "The Myth of Sisyphus" and throughout his subsequent works presupposes this awareness of the absurd. Furthermore, with the exception of Jan in The Misunderstanding, Camus' major characters are all conscious of the absurd. In this recognition they differ from many absurdist characters, most of whom either never or only intermittently observe the absurd in their lives. The characters of Beckett, Ionesco, Simpson, Pinter and Pinget frequently enact the daily routine of eating, working, commuting and sleeping without ever awakening to life's utter banality. Minnie, sinking into her grave spouting half remembered adages and cheerfully brushing her rotten teeth as long as she has the use of her arms, is the prototypic unconscious clod. It is the life preceding cognition which the absurdists

most often criticize. Camus, on the other hand, tends to presuppose the absurd and to seek beyond this for the proper posture for the absurd man.

This man, conscious of the absurd, has two choices. He may continue to confront the absurd, or he may escape from it.

Possible methods of escape are several. Man may commit suicide, since life is pointless, and may thus obtain an apparent victory over the absurd by choosing the time, place, and means of his death, thus depriving arbitrary chance or a victim. Esslin, in fact, implies that Camus approves this choice. "By 1942, Albert Camus was calmly putting the question why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide." (p. xix) What Esslin neglects to mention, however, is that Camus rejects suicide, emphatically denying the efficacy of man's taking his own life. A suicide merely connives with the absurd, assisting it in smashing his own potential. Even if escape were proper, and he judges that it is not, suicide is not truly a means of escape.

"Suicide...is acceptance at its extreme..." (p. 40)

The most commonly employed method of escape discussed by Camus in "The Myth of Sisyphus" is religious belief, or the "leap" of faith advocated by Kierkegaard and other religious existentialists. Camus describes the distinction between his thought and that of another philosopher confronted with the absurd.

To Chestov reason is useless but there is something beyond reason. To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason. (p. 27)

Camus therefore rejects dependence upon faith in an omnipotent, omniscient deity who desecrates meaning where we falter and fail and who may destroy the absurd by subjugating death and providing men with eternal life. Such faith, according to Camus, merely avoids confrontation with the absurd. Faith is escape, effective escape, but wrong.

The absurd hero must never avoid the absurd, but must continue to confront it and, by this constant confrontation, achieve a victory simply through refusal to yield. Sisyphus will not quit the struggle. The absurd hero must "accept" the absurd, not with the acceptance of acquiescence but with the active acceptance of one who responds to the challenge of a duel. From this acceptance he derives "his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation." (p. 44)

The choice of the absurd hero must be

to die unreconciled...The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance. (p. 41)

Camus cites Oedipus as an absurd hero who lives and achieves victory because he is able to conclude "that all is well." (p. 90) Camus doubtless recalls the determination of Oedipus to continue to live, concentrating all of his blind sight inward on the manifestation of the absurd in his own life and character. This decision is in contrast to the "escape" of Jocasta in suicide. Oedipus lives in the face of horror, surmounting the absurd through endurance.

This sort of absurd hero seems rather passive. His revolt consists of the mere insistence on constantly encountering the absurd. Yet such revolt imposes meaning on life:

That revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life. (p. 40)

Thus, even by the end of this early essay, Camus has conceived a more positive concept of man's relationship to the absurd than have the absurdists.

If a war had not intervened just then, Camus' philosophy might have retained this emphasis upon endurance. But Camus' personal experience proved to him that more effective revolt was indeed possible. The stimulus of the French Resistance threw Camus into a global struggle. He was forced to take sides, to believe in something more than passive resistance, to fight passionately and actively for the good before the brutal onslaught of Hitler's Germany. He edited the Resistance newspaper Combat, and combat the absurd in the world is just what Camus did. He did not merely witness in stupor or agony the slaughter of the Jews. He did not merely compose elegies for his friends sacrificed in the French Resistance. He denounced the forces of evil in the world. He went further; he appealed to logic and to human feelings, values which the reader of "The Myth of Sisyphus" might have deemed dead. Most important, he concluded that constructive action for the purpose of crushing the irrational forces loosed against the world was indeed possible. He not only assumed this action to be possible; he demanded, with all the fervor and eloquence at his disposal, that constructive action be taken.

In addition to protesting against man's inhumanity to man, Camus attempted to wrest some positive ethical standards from the philosophy of the absurd. In July, 1944, in his fourth "Letter to a German Friend," Camus explains that he, like many young Nazis, had supposed the world to be without meaning and had therefore deemed good and evil equivalent in an absurd universe. He and his imaginary Nazi friend began from a common premise.

Where lay the difference? Simply that you readily accepted despair and I never yielded to it. Simply that you saw the injustice of our condition to the point of being willing to add to it, whereas it seemed to me that man must exalt justice in order to fight against eternal injustice, create happiness in order to protest against the universe of unhappiness. Because you turned your despair into intoxication, because you freed yourself from it by making a principle of it, you were willing to destroy man's works and to fight him in order to add to his basic misery.²

As the war drew to a close it must have seemed to Camus and his associates that a victory over some of the absurd forces was being achieved. By September of 1945, Camus was able to write in Combat "No, everything is not summed up in negation and absurdity. We know this."³ However, this remark was countered by a warning that one must still be aware of the absurd. And the post-war years certainly brought home forcibly to Camus that the absurd still proliferated. About 1950 he complained in The Rebel that modern society simply dreams of a utopia

²Resistance, Rebellion and Death, tr. Justin O'Brien (London, 1961), p. 21.

³"Pessimism and Courage," Resistance..., p. 42.

instead of actively combating the absurd, as they can and should do.

Historic Christianity postpones, to a point beyond the span of history, the cure of evil and murder which are, nevertheless, experienced within the span of history. Contemporary materialism also believes that it can answer all questions. But, as a slave to history, it increases the domain of historic murder and at the same time leaves it without any justification, except in the future--which again demands faith. In both cases one must wait and, meanwhile, the innocent continue to die. For twenty centuries the sum-total of evil has not diminished in the world. No paradise, whether divine or revolutionary, has been realized. An injustice remains inextricably bound to all suffering, even the most deserved in the eyes of man.⁴

Thus, Camus obviously advocates revolt, but the exact methods which the rebel may employ remain somewhat obscure. Camus does not approve justifying the means by the end. Almost any revolt seems to necessitate taking life, but Camus is opposed even to capital punishment, the murder of a man in the name of a supposed justice. Yet without weapons, the rebel is powerless. Not only is the revolutionary disarmed, but even the defender of a country is rendered impotent.

Camus struggled to discover an escape from this seeming impasse. In reference to the morality of the defense of France against German aggression, the defense of freedom against the tyranny of the absurd, Camus assures his Nazi "friend"

But at the very moment when I am judging your horrible behaviour, I shall remember that you and we started out from the same solitude, that you and we, with all Europe, are caught in the same tragedy of the intelligence. And, despite yourselves, I shall still apply to you the name

⁴tr. Anthony Bower (New York, 1954), pp. 270-271.

of man. In order to keep faith with ourselves, we are obliged to respect in you what you do not respect in others....we want to destroy you in your power without mutilating you in your soul.⁵

However, the destruction of power often requires the destruction of the body, and an un mutilated soul may be small comfort to a dead man, especially if he is an unrepentant Nazi.

Camus examines the problem of murder in The Rebel much more extensively than he does the problem of suicide in "The Myth of Sisyphus." Doubtless the problem of murder seemed more pressing in the light of intervening events, especially the proliferation of the ideological murder, the murder in the name of a creed. Camus recognizes that murder is wrong, of course. However, since he is working outside the traditional religious ethic, his reason is unique.

To say that life is absurd, one must be alive....The moment life is recognized as a necessary good, it becomes so for all men. One cannot find logical consistency in murder, if one denies it in suicide. A mind that is imbued with the idea of the absurd will doubtless accept murder that is fated; it could not accept murder that proceeds from reasoning. (p. 14)

This condemnation of murder as cooperation with the absurd sheds further light on Camus' absurd hero. All four of Camus' plays are about murder. Obviously there is no absurd hero in The Misunderstanding since all the characters contribute to the absurd. State of Siege depicts an absurd hero, Diego, who opposes the absurd in the form of numerous antagonists, especially the vicious murderer, The Plague. Diego could

⁵"Letters to a German Friend," Resistance..., p. 23.

escape with his sweetheart Victoris at the cost of the lives of his fellow citizens or could save his life at the cost of Victoria's. He refuses to commit either personal or mass murder, voluntarily sacrificing his own life in order to preserve the lives of all the other townspeople.

Analysis of Caligula and The Just Assassins in view of Camus' condemnation of murder is not so easy. Obviously Caligula's murders are reprehensible, merely connivance with the absurd. But what of Cherea, who, paradoxically, kills to affirm the possibility of life? Obviously intended as an absurd hero, Cherea nevertheless breaks the rules.

Nor is Cherea the only character who assumes that the end justifies the means. Kaliayev likewise murders his oppressor, The Grand Duke. Yet there is this one difference: Cheres will live to be one of those to benefit from the overthrow of Caesar, whereas Kaliayev believes that, having taken another's life, he may not himself remain alive. As Camus explains in The Rebel,

The rebel has only one way of reconciling himself with his act of murder if he allows himself to be led into performing it: to accept his own death and sacrifice. He kills and dies so that it shall be clear that murder is impossible. (p. 249)

Camus thus attempts to extricate himself from the dilemma of the absurd hero. Murder is "necessary and inexcusable" and somehow from this paradox and from the double death of victim and rebel "springs the promise of a value." (pp. 140-141) This value is that, not only by sacrificing themselves and eliminating their oppressors, but also by refusing to slaughter innocent women and children, the 1905 Russian "terrorists"

were honorable in their opposition to the absurd. Camus approves.

"Kaliayev and his comrades triumphed over nihilism." (p. 144)

The logic of Camus' position is debatable, but this is not the point at issue. Important for an examination of Camus' position vis-a-vis the absurd, and in contrast to the position of the absurdist dramatists, is the basic optimism of his philosophy. Meaningful action is possible in life. The rebel can improve the lot of man. He can do more than destroy; he can create. (p. 252)

Although Camus' hope for mankind primarily pervades his late war and post-war works, there are notes of optimism even in the dark late 1930's and early 1940's, when even the religious were often close to despair. Several remarks in Camus' notebooks reveal his ability to look beyond the absurd. In June, 1938, he wrote "Absurdity is king, but love saves us from it."⁶ In November of 1939 Camus counseled that despair must be surmounted.

I can understand you, but I cease to agree when you try to base your life on this despair, maintain that everything is equally pointless, and withdraw behind your disgust. For despair is a feeling, and not a permanent condition. You cannot stay on in despair. And feelings must give way to a clear view of things. (p. 149)

Before man has a right to despair he must first act, and with every power at his command he must wage war on the absurd. (p. 151)

By December, 1943, in his second "Letter to a German Friend," Camus vowed from the depths of a soul which certainly knew fear and

⁶Notebooks: 1935-1942, tr. Philip Thody (New York, 1963), p. 93.

doubt that man still imposes meaning on life and that man can always conquer the absurd.

What is truth, you used to ask? To be sure, but at least we know what falsehood is; that is just what you have taught us. What is spirit? We know its contrary, which is murder. What is man? There, I stop you, for we know. Man is that force which ultimately always cancels tyrants and gods. He is the force of evidence. Human evidence is what we must preserve, and our certainty at present comes from the fact that its fate and our country's fate are linked together. If nothing had any meaning, you would be right. But there is something that still has a meaning. (p. 11)

This passionate affirmation could not be farther from the absurdist view of life. Life for the absurdist is without hope. Godot will never come. Life is closing in a sordid endgame. Human values have been lost in a clutter of furniture and other matter and a maze of spiritual anguish and guilt. Dead bodies crowd life out. Love is stagnant and communication solitary. Values are topsy-turvy, but no one notices, save a few solitary absurd heroes like Berenger, who cannot combat the absurd, but are, if they attempt a challenge, themselves killed by impregnable killers. These characters are either unaware of the absurd and hence foolishly happy or waging a joyless and futile struggle in a numb and numbing world.

How different is the worldview of Camus! Scipio, mourning for his father and weeping for Rome, can yet compose a poem on death which expresses the absurd hero's determination to love life even on the brink of imminent extermination. If Cherea said in an absurdist play "What

I want is to live, and to be happy,"⁷ the significance of the line would lie in the irony of man's desire for an impossible happiness. But Cherea actually succeeds in destroying Caesar and the absurd forces which the emperor embodies. His hope is able to achieve fruition. In The Just Assassins Kaliayev likewise achieves a meaningful act, and is able to burst forth with a paen in praise of life:

I'm still convinced that life is a glorious thing, I'm in love with beauty, happiness.⁸

Even in the plague-ridden Cadiz of State of Siege, in a universe where everything is contingent and the only certainty is death, even here the absurd hero's dreams do not prove idle. Diego makes life possible, even desirable. Finally, even in The Misunderstanding, where action on the surface, may seem ineffectual, one must note that the potential hero, Jan, merely fails to take the action which could save them all. Of this, his most profoundly pessimistic play, Camus is able to remark that the moral

amounts to saying that in an unjust or indifferent world man can save himself, and save others, by practicing the most basic sincerity and pronouncing the most appropriate word.⁹

People may communicate if they will only try.

⁷"Caligula," tr. Stuart Gilbert, Caligula and Three Other Plays (New York, 1960), p. 51.

⁸"The Just Assassins," tr. Stuart Gilbert, Caligula and..., p. 245.

⁹"Author's Preface," tr. Justin O'Brien, Caligula and Three Other Plays, p. vii.

Camus' philosophy is thus fundamentally more optimistic than that of the absurdists. They all long for a universe embodying similar ethics, but for the absurdists these goals seem possible of achievement only in a distant utopia. For Camus, the absurd can and is being combated here and now. His characters are conscious of the absurd, sometimes do effective battle with the absurd, and, in any case, may find joy in the encounter. "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill man's heart," writes Camus. "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."¹⁰

Jean-Paul Sartre

The distinction between Sartre and the absurdists is at once easier and more difficult to make than that between Camus and the absurdists. The distinction is simpler in that the differences are considerable. But comparison is complicated by the fact that the absurd which Sartre transcends is quite different from the absurd encountered by Camus and the absurdists. A whole new set of terms is employed by Sartre and a whole new set of premises is postulated.

Differences between Sartre and the absurdists are noted by John Gaaaner and Ralph G. Allen, Ethelbert Flood, and Leonard Cabell Pronko.¹ Sartre himself must have noticed the differences, for he criticizes both Waiting for Godot and Rhinoceros as bourgeois and

¹⁰"The Myth of Sisyphus," p. 91.

¹Theatre and Drama in the Making, II (Boston, 1964), p. 813; "A Reading of Beckett's Godot," Culture, XXII (September 1961), 261-262; Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theater in France (Berkeley, 1962), p. 21.

pessimistic.² Both Wallace Fowlie and Michael Wreszin explain that Sartre's philosophy is not pessimistic,³ and Sartre himself repeatedly stresses his optimism, even contrasting it with a despair which he finds in Christianity.⁴

Not only does Sartre not like absurdist plays and absurdist pessimism, but at least one absurdist does not like Sartre's plays and Sartre's philosophy. Ionesco, who respects Camus as a "just man,"⁵ expresses animosity toward Sartre in a number of essays and ridicules him in a play. An interviewer asked Ionesco

Q: Who are your favorite philosophers?

A: (thinks)....

Q: Sartre?

A: (makes a face) I don't like Sartre...⁶

Actually, Ionesco's hostility toward Sartre is not essentially philosophic. They also are opposed on matters of artistic creed, and this opposition is what Ionesco primarily resents. He feels that Sartre is a mere boulevard dramatist, a commercial writer rather than an artist. Sartre believes that prose is a utilitarian instrument at the disposal of

²"Beyond Bourgeois Theatre," tr. Rima Drell Reck, Tulane Drama Review, V (March 1961), 6.

³"Introduction," What Is Literature? by Jean-Paul Sartre (New York, 1965), pp. vii-viii; "Jean-Paul Sartre: Philosopher as Dramatist," Tulane Drama Review, V (March 1961), 35.

⁴See particularly Existentialism and Humanism, tr. Philip Mairet (London, 1948), pp. 25-56.

⁵"Memoranda," Notes and..., p. 237.

⁶"Peter Gelbard interviews Eugene Ionesco," Drama Survey, III (May 1963), 31.

social and political commitment.⁷ Sartre rejects the classics as dead thoughts by dead men, rejects them because he assumes they are about "dead things" and once denounced topical matters which are "no longer those of our time." (pp. 22-24) In other words, Sartre wants plays to be ideological, and he assumes that the great plays always have been. Ionesco, on the other hand, struggles against dogma, objecting not only in his plays, particularly in Rhinoceros, but also in his artistic credo. He criticizes "Sartreisms" and explains that ideologies are not the only dramatizable ideas; metaphysical themes are his preference.⁸ Although never clashing directly with Sartre, Ionesco wages bitter battle on this point with such critics as Kenneth Tynan, and he ridicules Sartre and the critics who advocate committed drama in Improvisation, or The Shepherd's Chameleon. Bartholomeus I consistently spouts Sartreisms, advocating didactic dramas, performances of which will carry academic credit for theatre patrons, speaking grandly of the Self and the Other and social gestus, and ranting, in parody of Being and Nothingness, about "the Being of not-Being" and "the Not-Being of Being in the Know."⁹

These last digs indeed are aimed at philosophical jargon, and it is really on the issues of the absurd and its implications that Sartre

⁷What is Literature?, tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1965), p. 13.

⁸See, for example, "Introduction to Three Authors," Notes and..., pp. 142-143 and "The Playwright's Role," Notes and..., p. 93.

⁹The Killer and Other Plays, pp. 127, 113, 121, & 118. All subsequent quotations from Improvisation will be from this edition.

and an absurdist like Ionesco are most dissimilar. There is hope in Sartre's existentialism because, quite simply, there is free will. Man may, nay must, choose, and these choices mold what at his death can be called his character, or essence. They are acts in the moral realm, deeds which affect others and effect changes and frequently impose meaning on life. Action is possible, even inescapable, and life is lived purposefully. These are the decidedly anti-absurdist implications of Sartre's philosophy and the morals of several of his plays.

First, the philosophy, complex, yes, but clear on the points essential to this distinction. Sartre does postulate an absurd, or, perhaps, more than one. The absurd is the "possibility of...other choices," other alternatives whenever man picks any given one.¹⁰ The absurd is also "the freedom of choosing but not the freedom of not choosing," because refusing to choose is itself a choice. (p. 481) And these absurdities are part of another. The necessity of choosing and the imposing prospects from which man must continually choose just one are thrust upon man by an absurdity, contingency. When Camus uses this word, he means death. But for Sartre, contingency is an altogether different matter. Death provides each life with the finality necessary in order for meaning in that life and the character of the one who has lived it to become manifest. (pp. 541, 545-546) It is birth and the place of birth which are contingent and therefore absurd. Birth is not chosen. (pp. 486 & 490)

¹⁰Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956), p. 480. All subsequent quotations from this work will be from this edition.

By this being which is given to it, human reality participates in the universal contingency of being and thereby in what we may call absurdity. This choice is absurd, not because it is without reason but because there has never been any possibility of not choosing oneself. (p. 479)

So man is born and forced to choose. He has no choice but to choose. But the choices may give life purpose and meaning, and there are no shifting identities or non-communicating robots hovering in the wings to augment some goblin absurd. In fact, once launched into the necessity of choosing, man need not be bothered by the absurd. Faced with choice, man meets, instead, anguish. Anguish is a reality more perplexing than gruesome. It is the response to free will. Faced with freedom of choice, which is anguish, man tries to escape. Irresponsibly, "most of the time we flee anguish in bad faith." (p. 556)

Man does not flee freedom of choice because there is a monster called the absurd hounding him. The absurd does not figure in Sartre's philosophy again. Man flees, perhaps, because he is lazy. He lets others make choices for him. Ministers choose, teachers choose, parents choose, governments choose. Man rarely needs to choose, and, when he must, he can always blame someone else for a bad choice. Man may indulge in bad faith, that is, unless he wishes to face with awareness the existential anguish of examining each choice on its relative merits and then endeavoring to make each decision the best one possible. This man may do. In choosing wisely, man may elevate his character. And in so doing he may assert "the dignity of man."¹¹

¹¹Existentialism and Humanism, pp. 43-44.

Both Sartre's philosophy and his plays are concerned primarily with existential choice and the consequences of choice. In What Is Literature? Sartre asserts that the writer "has only one subject-- freedom." (p. 58) It is in exercising this free will that man creates his character. This is the core of Sartre's famous premise "existence precedes essence." Man is born and thereafter wills his essence through his actions.¹² Put another way, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism." (p. 28) The correlate to this is that man controls his own destiny. (p. 44) He is no puny absurdist puppet, but a powerful being in command of his fate.

Because Sartre believes that life is "meaningful" and that every action is intentional and "produces an anticipated result,"¹³ he creates plays in which characters, far from enmeshed in the absurd, may freely produce effects for good or evil. Some of Sartre's characters, those in The Respectful Prostitute and No Exit, are guilty of bad faith. But others choose responsibly. Robert Emmet Jones finds Sartre's drama among the most healthy in contemporary drama. He judges that Sartre's heroes are, in fact, unusual in the modern theatre because "many of them do actually accomplish the task which they have set for themselves."¹⁴ More important, perhaps, they give significance to their deeds and

¹²Ibid., p. 41.

¹³Being and Nothingness, pp. 537&433.

¹⁴The Alienated Hero in Modern French Drama (Athens, Georgia, 1962).

dignity to other human lives. In Dirty Hands, rather than humiliate Hugo by disarming him, Hoederer risks his life and loses it. Hugo, in turn, refuses to dishonor Hoederer's memory by disavowing its supposedly political motivation. Hugo chooses the other alternative and delivers himself up to his party to be eliminated. A sad choice, perhaps, but neither wrong nor futile.

In The Flies Orestes makes a similar choice. He at once frees his people of the pestilence of the flies and gives his own life meaning. It would be easier for Orestes to refuse his freedom, to obey man (Aegisthus) or god (Zeus). But denying his freedom would be bad faith and would degrade him and the people of Argos. Orestes decides rather "to restore to them their sense of human dignity."¹⁵ In an up-beat ending quite uncharacteristic of absurdist plays, Orestes proclaims triumphantly

It is not night; a new day is dawning.
We are free, Electra. I feel as if I'd
brought you into life and I, too, had
just been born. (p. 107)

¹⁵"The Flies," No Exit and Three Other Plays (New York, 1955), p. 105. All subsequent quotations from this play will be from this edition.

PART III: THE DIFFICULTY OF DEFINING ABSURDIST DRAMA

SOLELY BY MEANS OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS

William I. Oliver thinks that Esslin overemphasizes absurdist style, judging "It is their subject and not their craft that effectively distinguishes them..." ("Between Absurdity and the Playwright," Educational Theatre Journal, XV (October 1963), 224) The thematic distinction is useful in contrasting the absurdist to such playwrights as Genet, Camus and Sartre. But Oliver and other critics who stress subject to the exclusion of technique ignore the difficulty inherent in a solely thematic analysis. A thematic analysis alone is not sufficient to distinguish some plays from the absurdist canon. There are plays from many periods and styles of dramatic literature which concentrate on absurdist themes, themes which are, as Ionesco frequently stresses, universal metaphysical problems. Loneliness and death, for instance, are preoccupations of mankind.

This statement, for example, embodies an absurdist attitude:

The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it--the death of the Old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new One for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is simply scribbling around on the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer.

Is this an admonition from Albee or a manifesto by Ionesco? No. It is Eugene O'Neill.¹

Another playwright characterizes his vision of the absurd this way: "But perhaps the universe is suspended on the tooth of some monster." This is Chekhov, recording his sense of human insecurity in his personal notebook.² Herbert Blau, who has directed a number of absurdist plays, writes of "the Shakespearean reality, which includes an allegiance of spirit to the absurd, the destructive, and the demonic, that is at the heart of Godot..."³ Robert Hapgood would agree; he analyzes Hamlet as theatre of the absurd.⁴ Jan Kott would agree; he analyzes Shakespeare's plays as dramatizations of the absurd, stressing, for example, decay and the irrational in King Lear and mortality in the history plays on the death of kings.⁵ Ionesco, repeatedly, has agreed.

Dramatic literature boasts an unmined wealth of plays on "absurdist" themes. Tragedy and comedy through the ages have dramatized the uncertainty

¹"On Man and God," O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism, ed. Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, William J. Fisher (New York, 1961), p. 115.

²Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, The Personal Papers of Anton Chekhov, tr. S. S. Koteliansky, Leonard Woolf, and Constance Garnett (New York, 1948), p. 30.

³The Impossible Theatre: A Manifesto (New York, 1964), p. 240.

⁴"Hamlet Nearly Absurd: The Dramaturgy of Delay," Tulane Drama Review, IX (Summer 1965), 132-145.

⁵Shakespeare Our Contemporary, tr. Boleslaw Taborski (Garden City, New York, 1964).

of life; both fate and fortune lead man to the grave or trick him with other misfortunes. Racine's comedy The Suitors begins with the lines

He who in the future puts his trust is mad, I say;
Those who laugh on Friday will cry on Saturday.⁶

The sentiment is borrowed from several Greek tragedies.

Since the absurdists blossomed immediately after World War II, it is the fashion to speak of the war having bred them. World War I bred a group far more iconoclastic than their younger brothers. Again, the country providing the majority of its practitioners was France. The movement: Dada. George Édouard Lemaître explains that the word "dada," supposedly chosen as an appellation by a random stab in the dictionary and signifying the baby sound for horse, was greeted as an appropriate symbol "of the meaningless, absurd condition of our epoch."⁷ Philippe Soupault, first a Dadaist and later a founder of French surrealism recalls that Dada "sought a careful exaltation of the absurd."⁸ Lest one conclude that only the absurd and not absurdist themes were the issue, one may note Tristan Tzara's description of the philosophy:

abolition of logic, which is the dance of those
impotent to create: Dada; of every social hier-
archy and equation set up for the sake of values
by our valets: Dada;...abolition of memory:
Dada;...abolition of prophets: Dada; abolition
of the future: Dada...⁹

⁶tr. Irving Browne (New York, 1871), p. 13.

⁷From Cubism to Surrealism in French Literature (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), p. 166.

⁸"Traces Which Last," Yale French Studies, XXXI (May 1964), 15.

⁹Michael Benedikt quotes in Modern French Theatre (New York, 1964), p. xx from The Dada Painters and Poets, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York, 1951), p. 81.

The last phrase is a clue. The Dadaists are nihilists. They praise the chaos which the absurdists abhor. Interested in the same themes, they take entirely different attitudes toward these topics.

If familiar with Dadaist treatises and not just the plays, one can discern a different emphasis from that of the absurdists. But such a difference is not so evident in many other plays.

Absurdist hopelessness is dramatized in From Morn to Midnight, in which the hero searches for a life worth living, worth the 60,000 marks he has stolen. Every person he meets and every experience he undergoes is hollow, rotten, disgusting. Before his death he can say "You can buy nothing worth having, even with all the money of all the banks in the world."¹⁰ Strindberg's A Dream Play demonstrates the thesis "Life is evil,"¹¹ and Indra's daughter weeps thus for man's lot:

Ah, now I know the whole of living's pain!
 This then it is to be a human being--
 ever to miss the thing one never prized
 and feel remorse for what one never did,
 to yearn to go, yet long to stay.
 And so the human heart is split in two,
 emotions by wild horses torn--
 conflict, discord and uncertainty. (p. 589)

Thwarted aspirations, stunted dreams, unfulfilled hopes--these comprise the whole of the lives of Chekhov's characters. Masha's refrain in The Three Sisters suggests that each life is a chained tree. Irena

¹⁰Georg Kaiser, "From Morn to Midnight," tr. Ashley Dukes, Dramas of Modernism and Their Forerunners, ed. Montrose J. Moses and Oscar James Campbell (Boston, 1941), p. 164.

¹¹Plays, tr. Elizabeth Sprigge (Chicago, 1962), p. 563. All subsequent quotations from The Dream Play will be from this edition.

prefers the image of life as a garden stifled by weeds. Lasitude chokes three girls who dream of going to Moscow but actually go nowhere except nearer the grave. Their brother dreams of becoming a university professor, but he attains, not the robe of an academecian, but the horns of a cuckold and the bills of an incurable gambler. But the pathetic family needs to find meaning in life; otherwise, as Masha says, "everything's just wild grass..."¹² So their faith is constantly renewed and they wait-- for a husband, a new lover, a better job, or an escape to a dream city.

Action for these Chekhov characters seems impossible. There is no external impediment to the completion of a move to Moscow. But decision cannot be implemented with action. Moscow is as remote as Godot or the end of an endgame.

Successful action is likewise impossible in The Cherry Orchard. Life is out of control and learning, from experience, to regain control is most difficult. The central ineffectual efforts here are, of course, those to pay the mortgage on the estate. Ranyevskaia refuses to try to save the orchard and, apparently, to even recognize the threat. Already living on borrowed funds, she cannot save, but consumes cash to no purpose, lending money, spending money, giving money, anything that is contrary to common sense. Gayev's action is no more constructive than Ranyevskaia's inaction. He swears on his soul that the auction will not be held, but the oath intimidates neither his soul nor his

¹²tr. Elisaveta Fen, Six Great Modern Plays (New York, 1956), p. 40. All subsequent quotations from The Three Sisters will be from this edition.

creditors. The battle to save the orchard is only one skirmish lost. There are others. Lopahin can buy an orchard; that only requires money. But he cannot propose. Equally ineffectual is the idealist Trofimov, the eternal student who simply cannot earn his degree. And, though the family seems fond of old Feers, they cannot manage to get him to the hospital, but actually entomb him alive in the house. Feers, unlike those figuratively confined, is literally locked in.

Time and death are culprits in many plays not strictly absurdist. Ionesco finds particularly prominent in The Three Sisters and The Cherry Orchard the theme of evanescence,¹³ and clocks broken and speeding are significant in the former play. There, also, Chebutykin repeatedly sings two pertinent refrains, one about a bear killing a man quickly, the other, before and after the Baron's death, the ditty "Tarara-boom-di-ay..../I'm sitting on a tomb-di-ay...." (p. 87) The hero of Walter Hasenclever's Humanity progresses from the grave to the grave. Wilder's Sabina expresses the constant fear of death which those characters escape by the skin of their teeth. The Glazier in The Dream Play explains that flowers grow in order to blossom and die, and the couple in The Dance of Death discuss their own endgame. Even Dadaist plays dwell on death, evoking odd images:

To the porcelain flower play us chastity on your
violin, O cherry tree, death is so quick and cooks
over the bituminous coal of the trombone capital...
Hey you over there, sir...

¹³"When I Write...", Notes and..., pp. 154-155.

Tangerine and white from Spain
I'm killing myself Madeleine Madeleine.¹⁴

Cruelty, of course, is dramatized frequently, whether in the insane murder of a bird in The Beggar by Reinhard Sorge, the cruel experimentation practised on Büchner's Wozzeck, or the haughty callousness of Chekhov's Natasha toward an old servant or an old husband. Emotional lethargy dominates the characters in Cocteau's The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower, when they are mildly amused at the death of their relative, the General, and a similar strangely dispassionate attitude informs Cady's response toward the murder of his wife and daughter in Kaufman and Connelly's Beggar on Horseback.

Values are obviously warped in the plays boasting the above acts and responses, and they are likewise inverted in many other plays from all periods. A contest in dishonesty continues for pages in Aristophanes' Knights. Martine, the shrewish wife in Molière's Physician in Spite of Himself, berates her husband for starting to die without having finished cutting the wood.

The supposedly absolute and eternal anchors of faith in religion, reason, and science are mocked in plays of all climes. The Gas Heart announces that God "is a nervous tic of shifting sand dunes." (p. 141) Nicias in The Knights assures the aethesit Demosthenes of the gods' existence on the basis of sound evidence; they hate him so! But his logic is nothing to that of countless often irrational logicians. Two

¹⁴Tristan Tzara, "The Gas Heart," tr. Michael Bendikt, Modern French Theatre, p. 135.

clowns in Circus Story by Armand Salacrou reason that they need not kill a third clown since he is not dead. The Donkey in Georg Büchner's Wozzeck demonstrates man's "compound reason" by behaving "indelicately."¹⁵ In The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower a character is eulogized for never having surrendered to evidence. The Second Character in Gertrude Stein's Listen to Me is particularly clever, reasoning

Nobody denies that the earth is covered with
people and since there are no people except
on this earth people are people.¹⁶

In scenes involving schoolmasters in both The Dream Play and The Great Highway, reason is the butt of Strindberg's humor or wrath. Several passages could easily be interpolated into The Lesson. Words are employed equivocally and mathematics is mashed. In The Dream Play the officer demonstrates by analogy, "the highest form of proof," that twice two is two. "Once one is one, therefore twice two is two. For that which applies to the one must apply to the other." (p. 561) In The Great Highway the Blacksmith's good sense tells him that Julius Caesar cannot have been born before the year one because he cannot have been born before the calendar began.

Many scientific oddities might seem to demonstrate the uncertainty of the world in plays not actually absurdist. Dead people may not stay dead; the victims of murder testify at the trial of their killer in Beggar on Horseback, and the same characters are shot and killed more

¹⁵The Plays of Georg Büchner, tr. Geoffrey Dunlop (London, 1952), p. 232.

¹⁶Last Operas and Plays, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York, 1949), p. 394.

than once in Apollinaire's Breasts of Tiresias. There is an unusual cold spell during the month of August in The Skin of Our Teeth; it happens to be the Ice Age. And Molière's Sganarelle explains that the heart used to be on the left and the liver on the right, in Physician in Spite of Himself. "But we have changed all that..."¹⁷ Not only do the body's organs shift, but in a number of non-absurdist plays, time is fluid. Time halts, reverses, or wildly fluctuates in To Damascus, A Dream Play, and The Skin of Our Teeth.

In a number of the plays already mentioned memory is uncertain and identity unstable. The difficulty of communicating is dramatized not only by almost all the playwrights already mentioned but by almost all modern dramatists of stature. Robert Emmet Jones in The Alienated Hero in Modern French Drama pronounces isolation to be "the essential" theme of modern drama. (p. 4)

Since absurdist themes are dramatized by many other playwrights, a casual reading of a play will obviously not yield easy thematic evidence that it is or is not absurdist.

¹⁷"The Physician in Spite of Himself," Eight Plays by Molière, tr. Morris Bishop (New York, 1957), p. 310.

INTRODUCTION TO BOOK II

William I. Oliver and the others who belittle stylistic analysis of absurdist plays are correct in part. What Oliver terms a "critical Babel" ("Between Absurdity and the Playwright," 224) has resulted from the dictums so far pronounced on absurdist techniques. This study intends to issue no original pronouncements on absurdist styles, since before new judgments should be made the already existing critical confusion must be cancelled.

The problem is not so much one of disagreement between critics as the plethora of grossly oversimplified generalizations which attempt to subsume a variety of styles under a few narrowly restrictive characteristic techniques. Emphasis on the supposedly nonsensical or unusual aspects of absurdist plays begins with audiences inexperienced in anything but the most ordinary, commercial, inartistic theatre fare, is compounded by harried reviewers who must quickly and cleverly rip off a few comments on plays they lack the time to thoughtfully consider, and is elevated to the status of accepted dramatic criticism by critics who feel the pulse of the philistine theatre patrons, read the hasty reviews, and rattle off pronouncements designed to sell by complimenting both on the astuteness of their perceptions.

Esslin does not fall into any of these three categories, but he has read the work of those who do. He has accepted the judgments of a great many people who find absurdist styles so peculiar that they sometimes do not regard absurdist productions to be plays at all. Examination of the great body of Occidental drama which also employs the

techniques exploited in absurdist plays, consideration of the aesthetic bonds between absurdist and non-absurdist plays, and recognition of a vast variety of absurdist practices should lead to the conclusion that sweeping generalizations about supposedly absurdist practices must be invalid and misleading. This is not to suggest that the several stylistic areas considered hereafter may not be profitably further considered, but it should affirm the need for a control of the impulse to speak as though absurdist dramatists created plays which are technically carbon copies of each other and which are so wierd as to be most dissimilar to other plays.

BOOK II: FORM

ON ATTEMPTING TO DEFINE BY MEANS OF PLOT,

CHARACTERS, AND DIALOGUE

Any play would have to be examined carefully for the number of absurdist themes and for the attitude toward those themes if thematic evidence were all that were available. But Martin Esslin, in his "attempt to define the convention that has come to be called the Theatre of the Absurd" (p. xii) suggests certain characteristic techniques which distinguish the absurdist plays from all others.

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end...if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings. (pp. xvii-xviii)

From this statement and others scattered throughout The Theatre of the Absurd, and from a comparable definition offered in "The Theatre of the Absurd," Tulane Drama Review, IV (May 1960), 3-4, a definition may be derived stressing three major points: frequently nonsensical dialogue, frequently abandoned "concepts of character," and frequently abandoned "plot construction." (p. 111) Twice Esslin speaks of these techniques as something new, as "formal and linguistic discoveries" (p. xiii) and as "a new dramatic convention." (p. 168)

If Esslin's "definition" of the formal properties of the absurd is to prove highly useful, then these three characteristics (1) must "often"

be present in plays which he accepts as absurdist and (2) must not be old, well-established techniques.

In discussing the plot development of absurdist plays, Esslin observes several characteristic features. Three somewhat different strands in these observations may be discerned. First, Esslin judges that the absurdist drama is "static" and "not intended to tell a story..." (p. 294) Second, he asserts, "A play, like a building, has...been traditionally required to be well-made..."¹ and makes the further observations, already quoted, that absurdist plays "often have neither a beginning nor an end," and demonstrate abandonment of "plot construction." Third, he finds these plays undramatic because they "cannot show the clash of opposing temperaments or study human passions locked in conflict..." (p. 294) They likewise do not put the spectators "in suspense as to what will happen next," but "into suspense as to what the play may mean." ("The Theatre of the Absurd," 14)

One may profitably examine these three points first on the basis of their application to other plays classic and modern and second on the basis of their reliability as an index of absurdist tendencies in absurdist plays.

Do the plays outside of the absurdist canon tell a story? Is a play in essence designed to present a narrative sequence? Perhaps the only possible answer is that this all depends on the play.

¹"Ionesco and the Creative Dilemma," Tulane Drama Review, VII (Spring 1963), 170.

There are plays which have no plot at all and therefore far less plot than that boasted by absurdist plays. Almost any play by Gertrude Stein, with the one exception of In Savoy or Yes Is for a Very Young Man, is completely devoid of plot. Carl Van Vechten recalls Stein's saying "that anything that could not be a story could be a play."² He quotes her as commenting, on Four Saints in Three Acts, "Generally speaking anybody is more interesting doing nothing than doing anything." Perhaps unlike some other playwrights who proclaim their dramatic principles, Stein practises what she preaches. Her An Exercise in Analysis, for example, develops as follows:

A PLAY
 I have given up analysis.
 Act II
 Splendid profit.
 Act III
 I have paid my debt to humanity.
 Act III
 Hurry.
 Act IV
 Climb. In climbing do not be contented.
 Part II
 Run ahead.
 Run on ahead.
 Act II
 Have you a knife.

Readers eager to hear the denouement of this exciting play may consult Last Operas and Plays, p. 119.

Perhaps the example is extreme. One could try plays from an organized movement of playwrights, the school of surrealism and its progenitor Dadaism. Beside such plays as If You Please by André Breton and Philippe

²"Introduction: 'How Many Acts Are There in It?'" Last Operas and Plays, p. VIII. (Sic)

Soupault, founders of Surrealism, the absurdist plays seem classically structured and lucid. Never is an absurdist play as incoherently formulated as Tristan Tzara's The Gas Heart! La Place de l'étoile by Robert Desnos, a fragile evocation of dream states, has something to do with collecting starfish, but any resemblance to story is absolutely unintentional. Another surrealist drama, The Mysteries of Love by Roger Vitrac, proceeds from one nonsense scene to another. At one point the manager announces that the play is over (it continues for another thirty pages) and that the author has killed himself (a consummation perhaps devoutly to be wished). The audience laughs and calls for the author, who appears covered with blood and laughing wildly. All this might generate the development of some plot line, but the play bobs along to other unconnected matters. If one used the definition of lack of story line to locate absurdist drama, what could do better than these plays?

Perhaps Gertrude Stein, Tristan Tzara, André Breton and company are absurdist. But these dramatists are not alone in their relative inattention to story. Many dramatists were apparently never told that their function was to tell stories. H. D. F. Kitto comments on the plays of Euripides

The plot is never in essence and rarely in fact a logical story in which certain characters inevitably work out their ruin, but a series of incidents, necessarily related but not necessarily a logical whole, chosen to illustrate or point to some overriding tragic idea.³

³Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study (Garden City, New York), p. 294.

Nor is Euripides the only dramatist not deeply concerned with story-telling. Aristophanes, like some of his twentieth-century cousins engaged in composing later day musicals, frequently provides only the slimmest thread of story as an excuse for his clowning. Once the women take over the government in Women in Parliament the previous characters all are forgotten. A new set of characters in a new situation are the concern of the play's spicy but grotesque conclusion. Saving the state, the play's initial concern, is forgotten in the farce of saving a young man from the fate of making love to three old hags.

Lest one conclude that certain Greek playwrights are primitive, plenty of more recent examples of lack of emphasis on story abound. Maurice Valency writes of Strindberg's abandonment of "the principle of logical sequence" in To Damascus.⁴ Another earlier play even looser in structure is Büchner's Wozzeck. Every editor arranges the scenes to suit himself, since there is little development from point to point, but rather the depiction of a number of typical moments in the life of the hero. As long as he remembers to place Marie's murder toward the end of the play and after all the scenes in which she is alive, the editor may juggle the scenes as he pleases.

But what of some traditional modern dramatists instead of the unusual types? Are not there "traditional" plot development and coherent story in all the plays by such venerable masters as Shaw and Ibsen? The answer is, not always. One may note, for example, Shaw's Passion, Poison and Petrification. A married woman is involved with a

⁴The Flower and the Castle (New York, 1963), p. 306.

gentleman named Adolphus. Her husband discovers the affair. Adolphus escapes from an embarrassing situation by eating the ceiling and drinking a dissolved bust, whereupon he is turned into a living statue. A policeman, a doctor, and the landlord are struck by lightning while attempting to assist him. The maid sweeps up the bodies with her fan. The angels sing "Bill Bailey" as the statue is erected. The curtain falls to the National Anthem. A charming story! Perhaps Shaw is also an absurdist.

Perhaps Ibsen always tells a story? If this was his intention, he failed in The Master Builder, an obscurely symbolic "story" somewhat in the manner of Pinter. Motivations are obscure and exposition leaves unsettled the matter of what really happened in the past. There was a fire. Some dolls--or something--or somebody--was burned. Solness may or may not have kissed Hilda when she was a girl. Solness may be mad. He may be possessed by some demonic force in Hilda. He may be the victim of his own ego or, simply, of vertigo. Anyone hoping to discover the "answer" or "answers" at the end of the "story" is doomed to disappointment.

Other plays traditionally studied as examples of fine nineteenth and early twentieth-century drama are likewise unconventional in the matter of story-telling. There is Schnitzler's Reigen or La Ronde which examines the asexual promiscuity of a number of paired characters. Situation? A bed or other suitable location. Story? Either none or the same one told repeatedly and involving passionless bed-hopping, each couple linked with the next by a common partner. Many absurdist "stories" are more complex.

Perhaps that play is experimental. One may try The Weavers by the venerable Gerhart Hauptmann. The play, written in 1892, need not be considered particularly experimental. Yet theme, not story line, links the episodes. Life seems absurd; death attacks even youngsters through the easy entrance of starvation. Different characters are involved in each of the play's five acts.

If story-telling is the function of good plays, even the famous and oft acclaimed Ghosts, another play by Ibsen, is a peculiar failure. Here Ibsen seems to present suitable exposition and development building to an exciting climax; Helene Alving must decide whether or not to kill her son. Suddenly, the play stops, this conflict unresolved, the "story" not over. However, the play's action (a matter somewhat different from the almost inexhaustible possibilities of mere story-line) is decisively completed. The last ghost has come to haunt Mrs. Alving. The ghosts of conventional morality and of Alving and Regina's mother, reincarnated in Oswald and Regina, have already haunted Helene. But the action does not reach completion until Oswald succumbs to irreversible insanity caused by the curse of his father's syphilis and the equally destructive code which both prevented his mother from removing Oswald from his father's contagion and sealed her lips to the boy and the world on the subject of her husband's dissipation and disease. When the ghosts have claimed their victim, the action of the play is over, and the outcome of the story is not an artistic consideration. But, were story-telling the function of plays, the audience might feel cheated.

Analysis of Esslin's second contention, since it is so linked with the other two, may be briefer. Presumably Esslin does not feel that

Occidental drama really has been "required" to be what is known as the "well made play." The tradition of Scribe and Sardou, still important on the commercial stage, is not necessarily central to the success of every play ranked great as dramatic literature. Presumably Esslin means only that non-absurdist plays do have the beginning and end which he fails to see in absurdist plays and do give evidence of plots which have been constructed. Primary consideration will be given this point in the analysis of the actual structure of representative absurdist plays. Most plays do have structure, beginning and end, movement from one point to another, although some of those discussed in the immediately preceding examples do not stress plot development.

However, there are plays which lack even the conventional requirements of beginning and end. Avant-garde plays in styles not absurdist but more surrealist or expressionist may be noted, for example, Artaud's Jet of Blood, Ann Jellicoe's The Sport of My Mad Mother, and Jack Gelber's The Apple. Another useful example can best be appreciated by quotation, in full, of the end of the play's last scene. The play is en gggarrde! by René Daumal. (Those interested in the full title had best consult the bibliography.)

The Cigar (to the Toothbrush): Let's blow our noses!

They blow their noses.

Mutually!

They blow their noses mutually.

(The Pernod With Sugar (moved, tears in his eyes):

Oh! I've suffered so much!

Napoleon (smiling idiotically, holding his hands over his ears):

I have three ants in my garden

The first is long, long...

The second is pink, pink...

The third is in its childhood, and it's that one

that I prefer!

that I prefer! I prefer! refer! fer! er! rrr...

The Snails (have formed a circle around everybody. Ferociously): Ahhhah! Kiki's going to laugh now?
All (with an unexpected simultaneity): Who cares? I'm circumcised!

Bubu (who, the nasty little thing, stood herself with the snails): M'sieur author! A neat denouement!

The Author (falls from Limbo, leaping--in a voice laden with emotion): Agag...gag...Agai...ga...
 Achoo!

Fireworks, overturned paintpots, the sound of trombones in the wings.

FINAL CURTAIN

A Gentleman in the Audience (to his son (eight years old)): Let that teach you, Arthur, to always follow the right road!

The End⁵

Esslin's third plot distinction, the absence of suspense as to what will happen next, he terms "the essential point of difference between the conventional theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd." ("The Theatre of the Absurd," 14) He continues by describing his conception of suspense in "the conventional theatre."

The former, based as it is on a known framework of accepted values and a rational view of life, always starts out by indicating a fixed objective towards which the action will be moving or by posing a definite problem to which it will supply an answer. Will Hamlet avenge the murder of his father? Will Iago succeed in destroying Othello? Will Nora leave her husband?

Of his last example, one might comment that there is, in fact, no question of Nora leaving her husband until quite near the end of the play. Esslin's other two examples of problems posed early in the action of plays are accurate. However, except for the neophyte who sees Hamlet or Othello without ever having heard of either, are these really examples of suspense? Even part of Shakespeare's audience may have known the story of Hamlet from the earlier dramatization of the tale known to have

⁵Modern French Theatre, pp. 215-216.

been performed in London in the decade preceding the premiere of Shakespeare's adaptation. Greek audiences watched unfolding mythic stories with which they were perfectly familiar, and suspense as to the simple "solution" to the plot, or "problem," to use Esslin's word, was probably infrequent then as well. Except for first nighters, theatre audiences are more likely than not to know the outcome of plays before seeing them.

There are plays, not absurdist, in which suspense as to the outcome is unlikely ever to arise. The audience observing a performance of The Mirror-Wardrobe One Fine Evening by Louis Aragon, for example, would be confronted initially with this scene:

In front of the curtain, a French soldier, twenty years old, meets a nude woman wearing a large hat with flowers and carrying a baby carriage on her shoulders.⁶

Curiosity is aroused, but the suspense of some anticipatable development is missing, for no further action could be improbable; anything can happen next.

This example, of course, is surrealism, not "conventional" drama. Given that one does not know the "story" of a play before seeing it, how frequently do theatre-goers ask "what will happen next?" Not as frequently as one might think, would probably reply Eric Bentley. In The Life of the Drama Bentley belittles "clever plotting," judging it characteristic of second-rate plays. "If the end in view is first-rate drama, the end in view is not surprise and suspense, is not plot."⁷

⁶Ibid., p. 177.

⁷(New York, 1965), p. 32.

Suspense, then, is certainly not uncharacteristic of good non-absurdist plays, but neither is it a defining or essential ingredient. The same may be said for the external conflict between one character and another which Esslin finds missing in absurdist plays. Frequently present in great plays, such conflict is not of any more than incidental significance, however, in such plays as Riders to the Sea, The Intruder, and Oedipus Rex. The tension in Oedipus Rex stems not from "the clash of human temperaments" but from the internal conflict so prominent in much good drama, choice and the execution of the resulting decision. Were Oedipus Rex "conventional" in Esslin's sense, Sophocles would dramatize the slaying of Laius or would allow Tiresias or another Theban to expose the crime of their ruler. Instead, Oedipus keeps asking questions designed to expose the criminal. The gradual realization that he is himself the guilty party does not deter him. The escape possible in the offer of the attractive throne of Corinth does not stop his tongue.

More significant than the validity of Esslin's comments on non-absurdist plays is the possible usefulness of his remarks on plot development in the analysis of plays which he does deem absurdist.

Esslin finds that these plays frequently dramatize no story. Could one, for example easily explain the plot of an absurdist play to a friend? Could one derive from a sizeable number of such plays stories which can be told as well as dramatized?

The answers, of course, depend on the play. But only a very few plays seem to have, in Esslin's words, "no story or plot to speak of." (p. xvii) The Bald Soprano is not a story. Orison is rather static, although

conformation of a choice is made. Foursome, Frenzy for Two, and Maid to Marry, all quite short pieces by Ionesco, are not stories, nor are Cascando and Words and Music by Beckett. Perhaps Endgame, All That Fall, Krapp's Last Tape, and Embers are not stories either, although at least considerable exposition is, somewhat obliquely perhaps, narrated. The Old Tune by Pinget is largely contradictory memories nostalgically contemplated. A Resounding Tinkle is relatively unstructured. Another critic might choose a few other plays as possibly without story-line or plot development. Granting that every play here noted may, perhaps, fit Esslin's distinction, these are only thirteen out of more than sixty-five absurdist plays discussed in these pages. Even were a few more plays deemed, for some reason, without story or plot, the resulting list would hardly be large enough to prove plotlessness a defining characteristic of absurdist drama.

Some absurdist plays have something of a story; others even stress quite a coherent story-line. Obviously Ionesco's late plays are paraphrasable stories; Rhinoceros and The Killer were, in fact, adapted from two of Ionesco's short stories. But even an early play by Ionesco like Jack, or The Submission, subtitled A Naturalistic Comedy, is, if not a perfectly conventional story, then a parody of one. Simply summarized, the hero's parents try to obtain his consent to an arranged marriage and the standards which must accompany such a marriage. The hero resists. He is introduced to the girl and decides, after becoming acquainted with her, to acquiesce to his parents' wishes. The standards which his parents impose are somewhat unusual--and therefore timeless--but the story is most ordinary.

Many plays by less well-known absurdists boast relatively strong underlying narratives. In Arrabal's The Two Executioners, for example, a woman betrays her husband, informing the authorities that he is guilty of some unspecified crime. The husband is tortured to death, while the woman alternately further torments him and convinces a recalcitrant son that she has done the right thing. As the corpse of the husband is removed, the son apologizes for his sullen behavior.

Esslin finds that Beckett's plays "lack plot even more completely than other works of the Theatre of the Absurd." (p. 13) There is certainly some validity in this judgment. Beckett's somewhat static plays are doubtless the source of Esslin's judgment that such is the nature of absurdist drama. But frequently the tension in Beckett's plays results from the attempt to act, from the contrast of this attempt with the resultant inactivity. This struggle to execute a decision is a form of internal conflict in its very essence most dramatic, and providing, in itself, a plot.

Furthermore, in some Beckett plays there is a more usual progression. In Act Without Words I the character strives for unattainable accomplishments and finally desists in his efforts. His eventual discouragement after recognizing the inevitable fruitlessness of such endeavors is an, albeit simple, story. Beckett's Play, although devoid of any overt activity, gradually reveals, like Oedipus Rex, a past history, an, in fact, ordinary, melodramatic story involving illicit love and suicide.

Esslin feels that Waiting for Godot "explores a static situation." (p. 13) This is a popular attitude toward a play stressing the difficulty of acting, the prevalence of people waiting for something. Alan Schneider

even reports a joke based on the play and told at the expense of what story there may be.

I've been told that his next play is going to be a two-act play where the first act starts with the house lights going down and then the curtain doesn't go up at all. Then there's an intermission, and the second act, which is the same except it's only half as long as the first act.⁸

Of course, Waiting for Godot is not motionless closed curtains. An audience may agree with the tramps "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes." (p. 27A) But Estragon articulates this judgment precisely when Pozzo and Lucky have just brought happenings, comings, and goings. The passive state of the tramps is little affected, but others in their world are certainly on the move. Furthermore, between acts, Didi and Gogo have left the scene. Didi has slept; Gogo has been beaten. Neither has spent the night waiting. Thus, the tramps are not entirely motionless. Rather, Beckett chooses their moments of stasis for dramatization, just as efforts to save the estate are made off-stage in The Cherry Orchard but Chekhov has chosen to stage the pauses between actions. The dramatic emphasis, in each case, is simply on ineffectuality.

What of Esslin's assertion that absurdist plays frequently exemplify abandonment of "plot construction" and "often have neither a beginning nor an end..." Once more, The Bald Soprano seems a fine example. The repetition of the first scene in the last was an afterthought; perhaps one can ignore its function as a unifying device. But what of other

⁸"Reality Is Not Enough: An Interview by Richard Schechner," Tulane Drama Review, IX (Spring 1965), 143.

plays? Ruby Cohn finds Waiting for Godot so carefully plotted that "each gesture, each phrase has contributed to the dramatic development."⁹ Later in the same article she refers to the play as "a tightly structured art-work." (p. 167) Apparently there is further controversy on this matter. Edith Kern, writing six years prior to the publication of Esslin's book, took a position much like his. She finds in the play no action, no plot, no suspense, no character development. She judges it faulty by Aristotelian standards and by such traditional standards "not a play."¹⁰ Kenneth Allsop, on the other hand, terms Beckett's stream of consciousness technique in some of his plays "quaint" because this form derived from Joyce is now old-fashioned.¹¹ To add to the confusion, Carlos Lynes, Jr. states that Beckett, Ionesco and Adamov are renewing "the ancient tradition of the drama as the imitation of an action" and Clifford Leech labels both Beckett and Pinter "Aristotelian" in their "conception of drama."¹²

Turning From Beckett to some of these other dramatists, one may contrast the above judgment of Pinter as an Aristotelean, plus another pronouncement by Bernard Dukore that Pinter's plays possess "a recognizable beginning middle and end," with the assertion by Douglas Reid

⁹"Waiting Is All," Modern Drama, III (September 1960), 165.

¹⁰"Drama Stripped for Inaction: Beckett's Godot," Yale French Studies, 14 (1955), 41.

¹¹The Angry Decade (London, 1958), p. 38.

¹²"Adamov or 'le sens littéral' in the Theatre," Yale French Studies, 14 (1955), 48; "Two Romantics: Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter," Contemporary Theatre (London, 1962), pp. 30-31.

that Pinter's The Caretaker "has no plot, no development..."¹³

Continuing with another absurdist dramatist already termed classical, one may add such supporting judgments about early Ionesco plays as "The Lesson is a tightly organized play, with a recognizable plot," and, concerning his The Chairs, "Never has a play moved with more relentless syllogistic logic from scene to scene to its resolution..."¹⁴

A student once answered simply "Everything," furiously underscored, to the examination question "What is anti-Aristotelean about The Lesson?" Ionesco himself would disagree. In Improvisation the character "Ionesco" asserts in the face of much pompous bullying from the three critics Bartholomeus

...Gentlemen, perhaps the theatre is,
quite simply, action, action at a given
time and place...

...

Bart I: (to Ionesco) What do you know
about it?

Ionesco: I believe it...and then Aristotle
said it.

Bart I: Aristotle, Aristotle! What's
Aristotle go to do with it? (p. 124)

In his essays, Ionesco explains that he believes that a play must do more than tell a story, a function of the epic and the novel.¹⁵ He speaks

¹³"The Theatre of Harold Pinter," Tulane Drama Review, VI (March 1962), 44; "The Failure of English Realism," Tulane Drama Review, VII (Winter 1962), 181.

¹⁴Bernard F. Dukore, "The Theatre of Ionesco: A Union of Form and Substance," Educational Theatre Journal, XIII (October 1961), 179; Kenneth Thorpe Rowe, A Theater in Your Head (New York, 1960), p. 109.

¹⁵"More Pages from My Diary," Notes and..., p. 244.

here of the construction, the development of any play, and explains elsewhere that he has rejected the form of The Bald Soprano, the anti-play.

I realized I did not really want to write "anti-theatre" but "theatre." I hope I have rediscovered intuitively in my own mind the permanent basic outlines of drama. In the long run I am for classicism..¹⁶

The final point for consideration in absurdist plays is the presence or absence of suspense and of external conflict.

Lack of suspense may be a danger in absurdist plays as it may be in any sort of play which is so poorly executed as to fail to hold the attention of audience or reader. However, it is not a defining characteristic of absurdist plays. Esslin himself quotes Pinter as saying, on his conception of playwriting,

The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question: What is going to happen to these two people in the room? Is someone going to open the door and come in?¹⁷

All of Pinter's "comedy of menace" plays generate suspense, as do those of Simpson's plays which dramatize some threat or invasion. Many of Ionesco's plays build to some climax; a sense of developing action is present in properly paced productions of such plays as The Chairs, The Lesson, and The New Tenant. A problem or dilemma is actually presented

¹⁶"In the Long Run I Am for Classicism," Notes and..., p. 131.

¹⁷The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 199, quoting Pinter in an interview with Hallam Tennyson, B.B.C. General Overseas Service, August 7, 1960.

for solution in Jack and in The Future Is in Eggs. Even in such short plays as The Leader and Maid to Marry, expectation of the entrance of the title character is aroused. Although the character appears without a head in the former play and in the wrong sex in the latter, the suspense is fulfilled with the expected entrance in both. In Ionesco's full length plays, where there is greater room in which to build suspense, more tension is generated, and his Berenger plays all build to suitable climaxes. Performances of The Killer and Rhinoceros can indeed culminate in carefully prepared and extremely powerful climactic scenes.

While the much discussed Waiting for Godot is obviously not comedy of intrigue or blood curdling murder mystery, there is suspense. Esslin finds here no impulse to ask what will happen, but surely at least as likely a response to the play would, indeed, be to wonder if Godot will come. The second act would be unnecessary were there not the necessity of answering this question. If the play is unusually plotted, the reason is not that the question of Godot's arrival is not introduced, but that Godot, instead of appearing, does not come. Even this ending is perhaps not so very unusual; Odet's "Lefty" also fails to show up.

Of the absence of external conflict between one character and another there is some evidence. Some plays have it; some do not. The Berenger figures consistently struggle with others. Amedée dramatizes conflict between the title character and his wife, and Choubert in Victims of Duty opposes his wife, the Detective, and finally Nicholas d'Eu. Ionesco himself wages verbal battle in Improvisation and the temperamental characters in Frenzy for Two, as the title might suggest,

clash repeatedly.

The abundant violence in many absurdist plays should suggest the prevalence of that sort of conflict. But psychic battle likewise is waged rather frequently in such plays as The Caretaker and A Night Out by Pinter, One Way Pendulum by Simpson, Professor Taranne and Ping-Pong by Adamov, Sing to Me Through Open Windows and Oh, Dad, Poor Dad by Kopit, and The Two Executioners and Fando and Lis by Arrabal. There are at least quarrels in Waiting for Godot and several physical blows, and Hamm in Endgame opposes everyone else in the play, taunting his parents and challenging Clov to leave him.

On Esslin's implication that non-absurdist plays develop character one may turn, once more, to the many avant-garde plays of this century and the last which present many characters either less vividly delineated than many absurdist characters or less fully rounded. There are the many expressionist plays which concentrate on the hero at the expense of all or many other characters. Carl Enoch William Leonard Dahlstrom even comments, on this matter, "At most, only one character in an expressionistic drama has anything more than a shadow of individuality..."¹⁸ Even the hero, Dahlstrom says, is a type, not an individual. For certain plays this extreme position might prove an untenable oversimplification, but one should certainly note the great number of characters in expressionist plays who are never given personal names as well as personalities. These people are designated by sex, occupation, familial

¹⁸Strindberg's Dramatic Expressionism (Ann Arbor, 1930), p. 65.

relationship, or some other appropriate tag. The characters in Sorge's The Beggar, for example, although occasionally addressed by name, are listed as

The Poet	The Girl
The Father	The Older Friend
The Mother	The Patron of the Arts
The Sister	The Three Critics

Groups:

The Newspaper Readers, The Prostitutes,	
The Fliers	19

Similar designations sometimes are given to the characters in plays of the surrealist movement. Such is the case, for example, in Le Place de l'étoile. And René Daumal provides the characters in en gggarrde! with really bizarre names. No character development can be expected or is provided for the following dramatis personae:

Mygraine, a woman in a hennin
Napoleon, Napoleon
A Toothbrush
Bubu, a little angel
Ursule, a depraved young thing
Some Snails
A Cigar, pure Havana ("Romeo and Juliet")
A Leech
A Sociologist
A Pernod with Sugar
Cleopatra, a person not to fool around with
The Author: Me! (p. 212)

Gertrude Stein frequently does not bother to designate any speakers for her lines.

Characters from many styles and periods of drama have been labelled flat or undeveloped, generally rather subjectively assigned terms of

¹⁹ tr. Walter H. and Jacqueline Sokel, Anthology of German Expressionist Drama (Garden City, New York, 1963), p. 23.

disapprobation. Ionesco dismisses Brecht's characters as "flat."²⁰ John Cruickshank calls Camus' Diego, hero of State of Siege, "little more than a cipher."²¹ S. H. Butcher finds Aristophanes' characters stripped of "all that is truly individual and distinctive."²² Dramatists whose plays are allegories or farces are most apt to find their characters called superficial or stereotyped. Playwrights such as Maeterlinck, who, like Pinter, sometimes deliberately leaves ambiguous or unexplained his characters' motivations, come in for their share of such criticisms. Anyone seeking to identify absurdist plays on the basis of abandonment of character development is therefore apt to pick on quite a variety of plays, with emphasis on those which he dislikes.

How accurate a description is this undeveloped characters label which Esslin attaches to absurdist plays? As is the case with the other attributes which he assigns them, practice here varies from play to play, and is influenced by such matters as length and style of play, the skill of the author, and the meaning given the word "developed." The taste of the critic is also a primary factor.

Robert W. Corrigan judges these creations quite harshly.

²⁰"Brief Notes for Radio," Notes and..., p. 134.

²¹Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt (New York, 1960), p. 210.

²²Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, 2nd ed. (London, 1898), p. 372.

In the Theatre of the Absurd the characters are types; they have no individuality and often not even names. Sometimes they are interchangeable, as for example in Godot, when Pozzo and Lucky change roles; or the same name, in a Kafka-like manner, is used in several plays--as is the case of Berenger in Ionesco's The Killer and Rhinoceros.²³

The number of characters without names is rather small, and some of these are well developed. These nameless people may be given choices which are quite character revealing, such as the brutality and officiousness depicted in the Concierge in The Killer. She is equally eager to kick her dog or to take over the lives of her tenants. Interchangeability seems most infrequent in absurdist characters. Corrigan's example is really quite a poor one. Even types may not readily trade places, and, were he to try actually switching Lucky and Pozzo in performance he would surely find the results quite ludicrous and at least very different from the original effect. As for the alcoholic, slovenly, bumbling hero of Rhinoceros and the idealistic reformer of The Killer, they are characterized quite differently, and the older, more imperious, dying Berenger of Exit the King is still a third character. That Ionesco sympathizes with each is perhaps their sole common characteristic. Each is provided with his own individual choices and struggle, and each is a well rounded portrait.

Practice in degree of character development varies widely from author to author, play to play, and character to character. Certain slight

²³"The Theatre in Search of a Fix," The Art of the Theatre (San Francisco, 1964), p. 600.

farces by Ionesco, such as Frenzy for Two, tend to produce caricatures. Beckett's mimes produce only slight delineation of character. Those plays which convey a comment on conformity or uniformity in human nature may do so with uniformly banal ciphers. The Bald Soprano and A Resounding Tinkle are examples. Yet another attack on conformity, Rhinoceros, produces a number of lively characters, often types, but certainly not nonentities. So even the content of a play may not entirely determine the degree of individuality in a given portrait.

Some plays produce striking types; Oh, Dad, Poor Dad's Madame Rosepettle and The American Dream's Daddy are shallow yet vivid stereotypes and exceptionally fine acting vehicles. Other characters in the same plays, Jonathan and Grandma, are more sympathetically and perhaps more fully sketched, reacting with a broader range of emotions, from depression to aggression in both cases.

Some absurdist plays seem primarily designed to delineate character and engage in penetrating psychological probing. Examples are The Two Executioners, Amédée, Clope, Krapp's Last Tape and, especially, The Caretaker. Yet other characters from the same playwrights' pens may seem much more superficial.

The interest in many absurdist plays in such topics as warped values and cruelty provides quite a number of absurdist characters with moral choices which are character revealing. Murderers are at least revealing one aspect of their personalities. Moral decisions fly thick and fast in Fando and Lis, for example, and the philos-aphilos relationship between the two title characters, finally resulting in the death of Lis, is strange,

but certainly not undeveloped. Nor is some major act like murder necessary to avoid pale characterization. Madame Rosepettle reveals her bitterness quite well by her trek to the besch esch night. She searches for couples making love and kicks sand in their faces.

Henri Bergson, writing long before the absurdists, judges "Every comic character is a type."²⁴ Apparently some critics of absurdist drama would disagree both with Bergson and with Esslin. David I. Grossvogel decides Ionesco's "major characters are perfectly human."²⁵ Esslin himself finds the characters in Adamov's Ping-Pong "fully realized individuals," (p. 67) and quotes Pinter on the subject of his The Caretaker as saying "I do see this play as merely a particular human situation concerning three particular people and not, incidentally...symbols."²⁷ Susan M. Black agrees that Pinter concentrates in this play on character revelation, and Henry Popkin speaks of the characters of both Pinter and Beckett as "distinctive."²⁸ Ionesco also sees many "dimensions" in Beckett's characters. ("Brief Notes for Radio," p. 135)

²⁴"Laughter," Comedy (Garden City, New York, 1956), p. 156.

²⁵Four Playwrights and a Postscript, pp. 70-71.

²⁶"Beckett and Ionesco," Hudson Review, XI (Summer 1958), 277.

²⁷The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 212, quoting from an interview with Kenneth Tynan, B.B.C. Home Service, Oct. 28, 1960.

²⁸"Play Reviews," Theatre Arts, XLV (December 1961), 12; "Introduction," The New British Drama, p. 24.

Any memorable character will be remembered for traits which, to the enthusiast, make him archetypal, and, to the detractor, make him stereotyped. Prominent characteristics may seem to render a character well delineated or may result in the person being tagged with a superficial label. Critics may characterize Hamlet as indecisive, for instance, but he is not really two-dimensional for all that. Furthermore, a character who is not a type may be flatter than one who is. Is Falstaff poorly developed because he is a Miles Gloriosus, or Goethe's Valentine well developed because he is not? No more should a Berenger, a Davies, or an Estragon be cavalierly rubberstamped as a mere type and dismissed to some obscure cubby-hole for characters who exemplify the abandonment of character development.

The extent of disagreement on the subject of absurdist characters should, at any rate, suggest that the presence of undeveloped characters is not a useful defining characteristic of the theatre of the absurd.

One more of the three definitions quoted from Esslin's book remains to be examined. The dialogue of an absurdist play is said to "often consist of incoherent babblings." Like the other two parts of Esslin's observations, this pronouncement fits parts of The Bald Soprano, but on this basis there are few, if any, other absurdist plays. It does, on the other hand, once more suit plays by Gertrude Stein and Dadaists, and fits also many sections of surrealist plays.

Stein's language so often dissociated from conveying logical ideas and associations is so well known as to require no further quotations. The nonsense which comprises the dialogue of Dadaist plays and much of the

automatic writing of the surrealists is quite similar. From the latter sort this speech from Breton and Soupault's If You Please is quite typical:

The most touching maps of the world are the silver globes in which the waiter arranges a napkin from time to time. Caged birds love these little gleaming spheres. It comes to the same thing whether one sings with the street or the sewing machine.²⁹

And this tale from Vitrac's The Mysteries of Love would fit nicely without alteration into The Bald Soprano, but would seem out of place in most other absurdist plays:

The Skeleton and the Spinning Top (a fable):

A Skeleton six feet tall
 Happened to run out of plaster
 The Worms no longer cared for it it had become so brittle
 and lovely
 And the rest what did you do with it
 When sitting down at the table
 We made animals out of it
 And the reason is this speed supplied
 By the momentum of my darling's heart
 That top
 (The heart or the darling?
 --Both.)³⁰

Other plays neither Dadaist nor surrealist contain nonsense, of course. There are such expressionist works as Humanity and The Immortal One, and Ann Jellicoe's The Sport of My Mad Mother, for example. Much of the latter is verbally unintelligible.

In contrast to such plays, the preponderance of "incoherent babblings" in absurdist plays is very small indeed. Almost all relevant examples have been cited already. The only notable omission is Lucky's speech

²⁹tr. George Wellwarth, Modern French Theatre, p. 170.

³⁰tr. Ralph J. Gladstone, Modern French Theatre, p. 249.

in Waiting for Godot. Esslin pronounces this to be "an endless and almost wholly nonsensical speech..."³¹ It is, however, considerably more coherent than this. Several critics see much rational import in the speech, and a few demonstrate this by cutting it to emphasize the thematic material conveyed. One possible cutting of the speech would be as follows:

Given the existence...of a personal God
 ...with white beard...outside time...who
 ...loves us dearly with some exceptions
 for reasons unknown...heaven so blue still
 and calm so calm with a calm which even
 though intermittent is better than nothing
 ...and considering what is more...it is
 established beyond all doubt all other
 doubt...that man in brief in spite of the
 strides of alimentation and defecation
 wastes and pines wastes and pines and
 concurrently simultaneously what is more
 for reasons unknown in spite of the
 strides of physical culture...for reasons
 unknown but time will tell fades away...
 and considering what is more much more
 grave...in the great cold the great dark
 the air and the earth abode of stones in
 the great cold alas alas...I resume alas
 alas abandoned unfinished the skull the
 skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis
 the skull alas the stones cunard...tennis
 ...the stones...so calm...Cunard...
 unfinished... (pp. 28B-29B)

William York Tindall finds here "less parody of theology than theology itself," and Ruby Cohn notes such themes as "the erosive effect of time, the relativity of facts, the futility of human activity, faith in God,

³¹"Godot and His Children: The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter," Experimental Drama, ed. William A. Armstrong (London, 1963), p. 131.

proof through reason."³² Any actor portraying Lucky who fails to emphasize the metaphysical implications of what is only superficially a jumble is incompetent, misdirected, or perverse. This speech, like most lines in absurdist plays, is neither incoherent nor empty babbling.

³²Samuel Beckett (New York, 1964), p. 10; Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1962), p. 217.

ON ATTEMPTING TO DEFINE BY MEANS OF COMIC TECHNIQUE

The subject of nonsense dialogue suggests another possible means of distinguishing absurdist plays from others. The comic dialogue is frequently, not incoherent, but nonsensically amusing. Audiences frequently find absurdist humor odd or unprecedented, although hilarious. Are there distinctive comic techniques employed by the absurdist and uncommon or unknown in other comedies? A few nonverbal as well as verbal techniques may be examined; however, not a one is unique with the absurdist. The absurd and the comic are, in fact, often regarded as synonymous.

The comic has been defined repeatedly as the incongruous or unexpected.¹ What is true for classical comedy seems to hold true for absurdist plays. Typical of the contradiction inherent in much absurdist dialogue is this suggestion from Waiting for Godot and its rejoinder:

Estragon: That's the idea, let's contradict each other.

Vladimir: Impossible. (p. 41A)

There are frequent exchanges similar to this one from The American Dream, which boasts replies of unexpected frankness:

Mrs. Barker...My, what an unattractive apartment you have.

Mommy. Yes, but you don't know what a trouble it is. Let me tell you...

Daddy. I was saying to Mommy....

Mrs. Barker. Yes, I know. I was listening outside. (p. 17)

¹ See the Appendix on Comedy, pages 251-253.

The humor of the unexpected also is exploited in the realm of stage business, as when, in Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, at a lovers' supper by candlelight, the Commodore clinks his glass against that of his enamorata, the glasses break, and champagne cascades over Madame Rosepettle's lap. In his clumsy efforts to rectify the situation, the Commodore, of course knocks the water over too.

Many absurdist gags and gimmicks recall those of other plays. The disguise of a man as a woman or a woman as a man, found in Aristophanes' Ladies Day, Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, and Wycherley's The Plain Dealer, are adapted, with the whim of fantasy, to a change of sex in Simpson's A Resounding Tinkle and to the unexpected appearance, in Ionesco's Maid to Marry, of a woman played by a strapping man. The latter is as ridiculous as Flute's appearing as Thisbe in A Midsummer Night's Dream. Günther Anders views the tramps in Waiting for Godot as traditional comic dupes, mistaken in their faith in Godot as are those cuckolds in comedy who still trust their wives.² R. D. Smith cites ten comic tricks frequently employed by both absurdist and non-absurdist playwrights. Several are ageless kinds of non-communication.³ And the Martins attempting to recall each other, elaborating on the most minute common memories, and then demonstrated to not know each other are reminiscent of the old

²"Being Without Time: On Beckett's Play Waiting for Godot," Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965), p. 144.

³"Back to the Text," Contemporary Theatre, p. 122.

gag "Have you seen..." "Does she look like..." "That's the one."
 "Never seen her."

If absurdists sometimes adapt old gags to their more extreme exigencies, they also borrow old jokes unchanged, or stumble accidentally upon the same comic formula. The clock in The Bald Soprano strikes seventeen times, and Mrs. Smith surmises that it is nine o'clock. The clock in Shaw's Passion, Poison and Petrification strikes sixteen. At night, that indicates eleven o'clock; in the morning it means two-thirty.

In A Resounding Tinkle the comedians produce a pair of scales with which to weigh their imaginations. In Aristophanes' Frogs the weightless quantities weighed are the lines of Euripides and Aeschylus, also manifestations of their imaginations. In Improvisation, Bartholomeus II instructs Ionesco, as Molière's Philosophy Master instructs M. Jourdain, that he has used prose all his life without knowing it.

Many of the comic techniques cited as significant even in classical treatises are employed by absurdist playwrights. Bergson speaks of "the very essence of the ludicrous" residing in automatism in man. (p. 81) Ionesco occasionally portrays inflexible characters. Bergson also cites as amusing the reversal of the expected relationship between characters, and mentions as an example "a child presuming to teach its parents." (p. 121) Albee's Mommy implies that mothers should be seen but not heard; she makes Grandma be quiet, threatening her with bed in the middle of the day. Bergson mentions two other techniques exploited in Waiting for Godot. First, action which recurs several times "contrasts with the changing stream of life." (p. 119) Such repetition is central to Beckett's play. Second, a play may "cover a good deal of ground only to come back

unwittingly to the starting point..." (p. 115) Evan Esar also mentions this latter technique. What he calls the "comic round" is a structure employed in Fando and Lis, The Lesson, The Bald Soprano, and Waiting for Godot. The course is circular "and ends where it begins."⁴

Absurdist methods of attacking false values are also ancient comic techniques. Faulty choices and reversals involving the exaggeration of trivia and the devaluation of the significant are mentioned by such diverse men as Lane Cooper in his An Aristotelean Theory of Comedy (New York, 1922), pp. 242, 257; George Campbell in The Philosophy of Rhetoric (Carbondale, Illinois, 1963), p. 8; Max Eastman in his Enjoyment of Laughter (New York, 1937), p. 156; Henri Bergson in "Laughter," (p. 141); Alexander Gerard in An Essay on Taste (Gainesville, Florida, 1963), p. 63; and Cicero in De Oratore, tr. E. W. Sutton (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), p. 401. The exaggerated understatement or overstatement of which Cicero writes also is employed by absurdists for purely comic effect without accompanying thematic significance. After Davies has pulled a knife on Aston in Pinter's The Caretaker Aston comments, "I...I think it's about time you found somewhere else. I don't think we're hitting it off." (p. 71)

The absurdists demonstrate the inadequacy of such supposedly dependable disciplines as logic and science by means of traditional comic techniques. Quintilian explains "A saying adapted to excite laughter is

⁴The Humor of Humor (New York, 1952), p. 37.

generally based on false reasoning..."⁵ The absurdists frequently exploit this principle, and another quoted by Lane Cooper from Aristotle, Physica Auscultatio, 2.6.

If any one should say he had washed himself in vain because the sun was not eclipsed, he would be laughed at, since, there is no causal connection between this and that. (p. 143)

This principle accounts for the humor of non-sequitur in such humorists as Mark Twain, as analyzed by Marie Collins Swabey in her Comic Laughter: A Philosophical Essay (New Haven, 1961), p. 120. It also explains such absurdist lines as Miss Haviour's observation, in Simpson's The Form, "You were held up by whitewash, I expect," (p. 111) and such actions as Amédée's making so much noise that all the trains are started.

Both false causation and pun are involved in this exchange in Simpson's Gladly Otherwise:

Man:...What are his kidneys like?
Mrs. B.:...He never lets me see them.
Man: You could wait till he's gone out.
Mrs. B.: I don't like to rummage behind his back. (p. 137)

Although Esslin finds "witty repartee and pointed dialogue" (p. xviii) missing from absurdist plays, verbal quips based on timeless comic principles are quite prevalent. Bergson's essay "Laughter" (pp. 137-139), Evan Esar's The Humor of Humor (pp. 56-94), the ancient "Tractatus Coislinianus" edited by Lane Cooper (p. 225), and Cicero's De Oratore (pp. 385ff.) provide lists of verbal techniques which the absurdists,

⁵Institutes of Oratory, tr. Rev. John Selby Watson (London, 1887), I, 431, Bk VI, ch. iii, 6.

like many dramatists before them, have employed. Cicero even mentions taking idioms literally, a trick dear to Simpson but previously employed not only by Aristophanes in his Frogs but by Roger Gilbert-Lecomte in The Odyssey of Ulysses the Palmiped, in which a character hangs himself by causal links; by Jean Cocteau in The Wedding of the Eiffel Tower, in which a photographer who says "Watch the birdie" sees an ostrich step out of his camera and frantically attempts to get that ostrich back inside the lens; by George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly in Beggar on Horseback, in which Mrs. Cady, who always has considered herself chair-bound, has a chair attached to her posterior; and by Molière, in whose Physician in Spite of Himself occurs this exchange:

Valere:...We are to see a girl who has
lost her speech.

Sgnarelle: Faith, I haven't found it. (pp. 300-301)

A number of other comic techniques of ancient and honorable status are employed by the absurdists. It seems unlikely that they have invented a one for themselves. Even the paronyms or coined words which occasionally bob up in such plays as Ionesco's Jack are found by Lane Cooper in plays by Aristophanes. (p. 234) Bergson anticipates the method of several absurdists who distort clichés, explaining that amusement results when "an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form." (p. 133) Pinter, Albee, and Ionesco exploit this method, as does Simpson in A Resounding Tinkle in Mr. Paraddock's comment about envying "the man in the street who's never learned to drink for himself at all." (p. 129)

ON ATTEMPTING TO DEFINE BY MEANS OF A FORM WHICH
REFLECTS ITS CONTENT

The absurdists use comic techniques exploited by other playwrights. But one possible defining characteristic may still be considered. Esslin distinguishes absurdist plays from those of the Existentialists on the basis of an effort he discerns in the former toward "an integration between the subject matter and the form in which it is expressed." (p. xx) He likewise finds absurdist plays less literary than others. (p. xxi) Both the truth of these propositions about absurdist plays and, if valid, the possibility that these are unique features which distinguish absurdist plays from others may profitably be examined.

One method of expressing the theme directly through the technique which is frequently employed by absurdist playwrights is the occasional dehumanization of characters or of people merely mentioned in the dialogue. People fail to properly cherish human life. Absurdists criticize faulty values when they depict characters who treat other people as though they were animals or objects.

Animals may be domestic pets, may serve as beasts of burden, may be raised for slaughter, or may produce commodities. In The Sandbox Albee's Grandma describes the dehumanizing treatment she received from Mommy and Daddy. They treated her no worse--and no better--than they might have treated a stray dog.

They moved me into the big town house with them...
fixed a nice place for me under the stove...gave
me an army blanket...and my own dish...my very
own dish! So what have I got to complain about?
Nothing, of course. (p. 37)

In Improvisation the three Bartholomeuses order Ionesco about as though he were a donkey until he finally begins to gambol and bray. In another Ionesco play, The Killer, delivery boys are exploited for profit and their personal lives are carefully regulated to insure their efficiency.

Voice from the Street: Our fifty-eight delivery boys waste too much time urinating. Five times a day, on average, they interrupt their deliveries to satisfy a personal need. The time is not deducted from their wages. They take advantage of this, so they've got to be disciplined; they can make water in turn once a month for four and a half hours without interruption. That will save all the coming and going, which sends up our costs. After all, Camels store up water. (p. 51)

Madame Rosepettle in Kopit's Oh, Dad, Poor Dad has designs on the eleventh child expected by some neighbors; if it turns out to be a Siamese cat she can feed it to her fish. In Ionesco's The Future Is in Eggs Roberta lays eggs which can be eaten, but they can also be sold or hatched to become stairs, shoes, pencils and matches when they grow up. And Beckett's Lucky, rather than producing a commodity, is himself one; Pozzo plans to sell him at the fair.

Many characters in absurdist plays are treated as scarcely human, but three are particularly handled as mere things. In Simpson's One Way Pendulum the Groomkirbys regard Aunt Mildred as a useless object simply cluttering up the living room, and in the same dramatist's Gladly Otherwise Mr. Brandywine has little more excuse for his existence. Noticing her husband, the Man inquires of Mrs. Brandywine

Is he serving any purpose?
Sitting there?

Mrs. B.: Only to keep the floor boards in position.

Man: (in a tone of grave reproof).
There are nails for that, Mrs. Brandywine.

Mrs. Brandywine is at a loss.
(Going) You could dispense with one or the other. You don't need both. (pp. 136-137)

And Ionesco's Young Lady in The Motor Show is purchased to be used as an automobile.

Perhaps alone in using dehumanization thematically as a criticism of this tendency in mankind, the absurdists certainly are not unique in employing this technique. Surrealists frequently delineate characters who treat people like objects or animals. This tendency is particularly notable in Apollinaire's The Breasts of Tiresias. Ortega y Gasset describes the same tendency, which he discerns in modern drama, toward the "progressive elimination of the human...elements."¹ Ortega cites Pirandello and Giraudoux as playwrights who utilize various dehumanizing techniques. Although Ortega discusses only dehumanization in modern art, Bergson's essay "Laughter," deriving its examples largely from Molière and other dramatists now deemed "classical," describes a common comic effect as the exposure of

that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automation, of movement without life. (p. 117)

¹"The Dehumanization of Art," The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture (Garden City, New York), p. 11.

Formal methods also directly present the theme of non-communication. In Ionesco's The Lesson language gets out of hand and comes between the characters. In the mouth of a seemingly mild man words lead "to calamity" as the maid says. (p. 60) There is not even a penalty for dealing blows with language; the professor kills forty people and is still free to strike again, free to talk more students into their graves. The plot and technique of the whole play convey the failure of the professor to impart his knowledge to the student. The murder even carries symbolic sexual overtones, the intimacy of which renders the communication failure all the more acute.

Ionesco explains that the clichés which his characters sometimes use are a symptom of their inability to communicate.² Other absurdist characters who speak without communicating seem also to be expressing their creators' dismay at the conversations which the playwrights hear and in which they engage. In Fando and Lis characters pursue long digressions about nothing and engage in long controversies on matters about which they do not disagree. In Pinter's revue sketches people engage in incessant, repetitive small-talk. He designed these sketches to convey "the unwillingness to communicate,"³ or, sometimes, the sheer inability to do so, as when the Old Man in A Night Out speaks of a man who looked "compressed with himself."⁴ Shakespeare, Sheridan, and

²"Further Notes," Notes and..., p. 227.

³John Russell Taylor, Anger and After, p. 296.

⁴A Slight Ache and Other Plays (London, 1961), p. 49.

Molière use such malapropisms for their own purposes, to characterize, to obtain a comic effect. Pinter is doing these things too, but at least one purpose is to make a comment on communication as well.

Absurdist playwrights may express any of their themes with formal means. Ionesco comments on the "interchangeability" of people when, in The Bald Soprano, he repeats the opening scene at the end of the play, but substitutes the Martins for the Smiths.⁵ Ionesco dramatizes the hollow marriage of the Martins by exposing them as literally perfect strangers. Pinter depicts Len's mental retreat from the world by rendering his thoughts progressively more fanciful and morbid. Beckett expresses the difficulty of acting by creating characters who cannot act. The relationship between form and content is clear.

Typical of the expression of theme by means of plot is The New Tenant. Ionesco dramatizes the purposeful isolation of a man who plugs with objects the slightest crack through which he might be reached by another human soul. A new tenant arrives to occupy an apartment. He insists that the window be closed and kept closed. He rejects the overtures of the concierge and sends her away. He covers the still threatening window with a sideboard and a picture turned to the wall. He offers the rest of his liquor to the Furniture Movers so that none will remain to tempt his neighbors to intrude. He allows a radio to be installed only on the condition that it does not work. He instructs the Furniture Movers to surround him with furniture on all sides and then

⁵"The Birth of the Bald Soprano," Notes and..., p. 185.

wall him in with screens and planks. They then oblige him by extinguishing the light before leaving.

The Gentleman in The New Tenant surrounds himself with inanimate objects. Absurdist characters floundering in a universe denuded of spirit frequently clutter their lives with things in an attempt to hide the hollow where the heart of life should be. Ionesco refers to that with which man encumbers himself as "the materialization of solitude...."⁶ He cites the extra noses in Jack, the chairs in The Chairs, the mushrooms and body in Amédée. In this last play the characters finally are completely hidden. In Victims of Duty Madeleine covers the whole sideboard with coffee cups, in The Future Is in Eggs Roberta floods the stage with eggs, and in The New Tenant the Gentleman's furniture obstructs the subway, the roads, and the rivers, paralyzes all France, stops life itself. To Ionesco and, he hopes, his audience as well, "the proliferation of material things...expresses spiritual absence." ("In the Long Run I Am for Classicism," p. 132)

The same spiritual void is expressed by other absurdist. Beckett, following a somewhat similar pattern, strips the barren landscape of all but a few significant objects which still are depicted as attempts to prop up caved-in souls. In Waiting for Godot men play with carrots, chicken legs, hats, shoes, and sand. In Happy Days a lone woman manipulates a parasol, a hat and the contents of a shopping bag, source of spectacles, magnifying glass, music-box, nailfile, comb and brush, toothbrush, and almost depleted toothpaste, medicine and lipstick. And she

⁶"My Plays and I," Notes and..., p. 164.

toys with a gun. In these objects Beckett's characters find escape from their souls; Krapp's bliss is a banana. But the heavens and the earth stretch away menacing and sterile, like the souls who will never be left alone with themselves.

In The American Dream the sterility likewise encompasses more than Daddy and the emasculated dream, and boxes and a defective toilet drain the energies which should go into compassion and soulfull dreams. Adamov's Arthur and Roger (equally effectively) crowd their lives with pinball machines, and Kopit's Ottoman also passes his life in games; these diversions are as effective as objects for burying men alive.

Proliferation of soulless matter is just a kind of visual or otherwise dramatic or sensuous symbol or image. The absurdists have received considerable fame, even notoriety, for symbolic dramatization of their themes. Most often accused of symbolism are Ionesco and Beckett, although each of the absurdists occasionally seems to indulge in this sometimes immediately apprehensible sometimes ambiguously opaque means of rendering his thoughts sensuous, or reflecting his content in his form.

The initial impulse for many of Ionesco's plays seems to have sprung from a symbol which evokes a response to theme without fettering the possible significance of the play to one narrow thesis and without bogging the play down in a static image. The proliferation of matter is by its very nature a developing image culminating in a natural climax as the stage is inundated with a profusion of some stifling physical presence. In plays like The Bald Soprano and The Lesson words replace things as the invader and sheer verbiage hurries the action along to some absurdist dénouement.

In his later plays on the Berengers Ionesco turns to more complex and sustained symbolism. Whether the plays should be called allegories or not is perhaps simply a matter of taste. That The Killer, Rhinoceros, and Exit the King all signify parables of universal applicability is evident. Yet each play suggests more than one possible interpretation, and the action, rather than the characters, is symbolic. Ionesco himself despises bloodless stage pedagogy, complaining that in the social thesis play "allegory and academic illustration seem to have been substituted for the living image of truth."⁷ He calls for "a synthesis...of the particular and the universal,"⁸ citing several times, as an example of such a union, Shakespeare's Richard II, whose lonely death suggests that of each man.

Rhinoceros exposes men as the pack of silly animals they can be, dumb and dangerous, conforming to a code or joining the ranks of an ideology. Exit the King may present a dying mind no longer able to control its body, but the characters are fully developed people and the significance of Berenger alone though among friends and family is patterned on that which Ionesco finds in Richard's death. The Killer is usually interpreted as another story of men dying. The briefcases carried by the Architect, Édouard, the Old Man, the Man, and Mother Peep are hence their burdens of guilt, their indifference to the absurd in the guise of the Killer death which so galls Berenger.

⁷"Experience of the Theatre," Notes and..., p. 33.

⁸"A Talk About the Avant-Garde," Notes and..., p. 48.

But briefcases likewise suggest bureaucracy and this is a simple key to an interpretation of the play as a full blown parable against Nazi totalitarianism. Many elements of the play which otherwise seem merely mysterious or incidental jibes can be fully accounted for by this interpretation. The Architect impedes Berenger's efforts with red tape and the police and Mother Peep's goose-stepping geese also hinder the hero's efforts. Most extensively judged culpable is Édouard, who harbors crime without knowing it. He protests his innocence because of his ignorance, even though he carries guilt with him wherever he goes. His briefcase contains all the evidence needed to arrest the Killer. His name, his address, his picture, his future plan of attack, all are in Édouard's possession. But Édouard evades his responsibility. He is afraid that it is indiscreet to pry into the Killer's things, and he would rather go for a walk than bother trying to catch the Killer. Gradually he remembers having read the criminal's journal before, but he had thought his ravings were dreams merely. He had taken them no more seriously, one may infer, than the Germans did Mein Kampf. Why, he had even rather admired the Killer's methodical plan of procedure.

Berenger finally is himself indicted. He is so intent upon thwarting a single criminal that he is quite indifferent to the monstrous Mother Peep, and, when he eventually is confronted by the Killer, Berenger tries too hard to understand his adversary. Berenger renders his own efforts ineffectual by a willful tolerance of evil more disturbing than Edouard's consistently simple-minded complaisance.

Ionesco is just one of many absurdists to employ symbolism. Beckett, of course, is almost infamous for the diverse meanings which may be

attached to his symbols. He leaves the significance of Godot purposely ambiguous, claiming that he would have identified Godot in the play had he known who the absent character was.⁹ Theories about this mystery man continue to multiply. Jean-Jacques Mayoux explains that Godot is "spoken" Irish for God,¹⁰ and the interpretation that Godot is God is probably the most popular. David Grossvogel, Frederick J. Hoffman, and Wallace Fowlie suggest this traditional view, and Wolcott Gibbs can find no other identity for Godot and therefore dislikes the play and its simple message.¹¹ But the futility of waiting for God is only one possibility among a host of others, some significant, some only amusing. There is always the possibility that the bumbling tramps would not recognize their anticipated host even if he did come, and several writers suggest the possibility that Pozzo is Godot.¹² Norman Mailer even postulates that Lucky is really Godot.¹³ Perhaps someone should suggest that the messenger is really Godot in disguise.

⁹See The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 12 and Frederick Thon, "Directing the Absurdist Drama," Players Magazine, XXXIX (October 1962), 8.

¹⁰"The Theatre of Samuel Beckett," Perspective, 11 (Autumn 1959), 148.

¹¹Twentieth-Century French Drama (New York, 1961), p. 324; Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self (Carbondale, Illinois, 1962), p. 52; Dionysus in Paris (London, 1961), p. 214; "Enough Is Enough Is Enough," New Yorker, XXXII (May 5, 1956), 89-90.

¹²See Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut, p. 216; Frederick Thon, "The Quack and the Dead," Educational Theatre Journal, XVII (October 1965), 273; Wallace Fowlie, Dionysus in Paris, p. 214.

¹³"A Public Notice on Waiting for Godot," Advertisements for Myself, p. 323.

Most critics still hold that Godot never shows up at all. Joseph N. Calarco explains Godot as "the good old days;" Norman Mailer chooses Impotence; William York Tindall and Gunther Anders hold out for a Godot who is "nothing."¹⁴ The tramps, according to the latter theory, merely assume that, as they exist, a goal must inspire them. Two writers report hearing from an unnamed source that Godot is Charles de Gaulle.¹⁵ Leonard Caball Pronko explains that Beckett has claimed that he named his title character after a bicycle racer, (pp. 35-36) whom Richard N. Coe identifies as Godeau.¹⁶ This last critic and another, Ruby Cohn in Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (pp. 215-216) cite similar names in various languages. In French there are "godailleur ('to guzzle'), godenot ('a misshapen man'), godichon ('a lout')" and "godillot, 'a hob-nailed boot,'" (Coe, p. 93) whereas Russian supplies "god, 'a year'--old Father Time himself." (Coe) Godot is even found in both Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, in each of which it is an expletive ellided from "God whot," meaning "God knows."

But linguistic skill is not a prerequisite for suggesting possible identities; anything for which one may wait is a candidate. Alain Robbe-Grillet presents several possibilities:

¹⁴"Vision without Compromise: Genet's The Screens," Drama Survey, IV (Spring 1965), 44; "Column Seventeen," Advertisements for Myself, p. 316; Samuel Beckett, p. 9; "Being Without Time," pp. 143-144.

¹⁵Leonard Caball Pronko, Avant-Garde, p. 34 & Faubion Bowers, "Theatre of the Absurd: It Is Here to Stay," Theatre Arts, XLVI (November 1962), 65.

¹⁶Samuel Beckett (New York, 1964), p. 93.

Godot--again, why not?--is the earthly ideal of a better social order. Don't the tramps long for food and shelter and the possibility of not being beaten?..Godot is silence: you have to speak while you wait for it in order to have the right to be still at last. Godot is the inescapable self..¹⁷

Convicts at San Quentin saw Godot as escape or parole or pardon. Negroes at the Free Southern Theatre's performances found in Godot the object of their yearning for civil and human rights. Godot is death for those tired of living; there is even, in the second syllable, a possible anagram from the German Tod.

Whatever Godot may be for any given person, Beckett has dramatized a myth now imprinted indelibly in the modern mind. Richard N. Coe explains that the play's original title was En Attendant, or, simply, Waiting, (p. 88) and the stress remains on the act, not on any particular abstraction symbolized by a character. The waiting is futile, the act is futile, and the subject is thus the broad and universal one of futility.

That futile waiting is of universal import is obvious from a brief survey of several other plays which dramatize the same theme by means of the same action. Probably numerous other parallels exist, but a few are sufficient illustration. The loafers and lovers on the Camino Real in Tennessee Williams' play of the same name are waiting and hoping, some for escape, some for money. Each is desperate for the realization of a dream. Strindberg in at least two plays depicts a waiting hero. In To

¹⁷"Samuel Beckett, or 'Presence' in the Theatre," tr. Barbara Bray, Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 110.

Damascus the Stranger has waited for forty years "for what never comes."¹⁸ He is not even sure what he awaits, but assumes his dream is probably happiness. In A Dream Play the officer waits for Miss Victoria, who is always sure to come soon. His flowers fade, wither and die. He grows old and grey. Still he waits in a vigil equally futile and endless. Eric Bentley even remembers a Balzac play about one Godeau who has not yet arrived as the curtain falls.¹⁹ And Chekhov at his death left an unfinished scenario about characters who futilely await the coming of a great hero.²⁰

Actions which are found in various guises in so many modern plays express a fundamental concern of men. At their best, the absurdist create or recreate such universal myths.

Although the sensuous means of expression employed in an absurdist play is frequently a fully developed symbol or an image pervading the action of an entire play, less extensive but still expressive means are also employed. Visual images by means of scenery and props contribute to the expression of many absurdist plays. Ionesco's title character in The Leader is tumultuously acclaimed throughout the play. Finally, to frenzied cheers, the great man enters. He has no head. The impact of this brainless wonder on an audience must be spontaneous and purely

¹⁸The Road to Damascus, tr. Graham Rawon (New York, 1960), p. 49. See also p. 25.

¹⁹"Undramatic Theatricality," What Is Theatre? (Boston, 1956), p. 158.

²⁰See Ernest J. Simmons, Chekhov: A Biography (Boston, 1962), p. 580, note 14 and Robert Brustein, The Theatre Revolt, p. 163, note 12.

sensory, although ratiocination may further refine the image and its implications.

Such images are immediate and highly theatrical. Equally useful in translating the vision of the playwright into a histrionic tongue is the pantomime sometimes employed by absurdists. Examples are Arrabal's use of Fodere, a mute who must mime in order to communicate; Kopit's use of the clown, who frequently pantomimes in Sing to Me Through Open Windows; Ionesco's use of Choubert, who, in Victims of Duty, struggles silently to descend into the mud and to scale a mountain peak. Three absurdist plays executed entirely in pantomime are Kopit's The Hero and Beckett's Acts Without Words I and II. Words are not necessary to arouse emotion and stimulate in the audience an intuitive apprehension of thematic material. Kopit comments on Jonathan's loneliness through dialogue and through the dramatic action of moral choices made by all three of the major characters. He also conveys the same point without a line. Jonathan sits in silence, alone. He drifts to the balcony. When he timidly waves at the carnival crowds and they react by immediately dispersing, much is said. Words are unnecessary. Jonathan is rejected, lonely, miserable.

Particularly moving and perfectly clear pantomimic evocation of theme are the efforts by Fando to reach an unresponsive Lis in Arrabal's Fando and Lis and the much more extensive efforts by the man in Act Without Words I to either satisfy his needs or kill himself. All these efforts are futile.

Esslin judges that a particularly effective sensuous expression of absurdist content is achieved in the contradiction of the text by the

action or the posture of the characters. (p. xxi) Like many of the sensuous means of expression already discussed, this method is employed more by Ionesco and Beckett than by the other absurdists. Examples from plays by Ionesco include, from the frequently purely verbal Exit the King,

(The King falls into the invalid chair, which Juliette has just brought forward. They cover him up and give him a hot water bottle, while he is still saying:)

King: I can still stand up. (p. 58)

In The Killer Ionesco expresses Édouard's indifference to Berenger's quest with this simple contradiction: "Édouard: (still indifferent and without moving)...You can see I'm looking for it." (p. 80) In Beckett's Waiting for Godot characters leave or help others by standing still. In Endgame the word is also juxtaposed with a contradictory act. Hamm yawns as he proclaims the loftiness of his suffering. He imagines that the stuffed dog is standing and imploring him while the dog sprawls on its side. Clov announces that he is leaving and then remains motionless for the remainder of the play. The mind is divorced from its ability to execute or impose its will.

The presence in absurdist plays of much visual imagery and many immediately apprehensible physical symbols may stimulate dangerous generalizations about the relative interest of absurdist playwrights in verbal versus non-verbal means of expression. William I. Oliver suggests that these dramatists "employ or rely upon physical action to a degree seldom before known in the drama,"²¹ Actually, The Frogs or

²¹"Between Absurdity and the Playwright," Educational Theatre Journal, XV (October 1963), 229.

Midsummer Night's Dream contain considerably more activity than do Beckett's physically static Play and almost static Happy Days and Ionesco's The Lesson, for the last of which the director must invent some sort of movement as none is indicated for Student or Professor from the former's entrance until her murder. Perhaps one can generalize that absurdist frequently communicate directly by means of visual impression without the intervention of many verbal precepts. Beckett's physically immobilized characters in Endgame, Happy Days and Play are visual metaphors in which the inability to move quite simply signifies the inability to act. But surely it is dangerous to infer from these physical elements that they always are more important than language and that some supposed preponderance of the physical indicates, in Esslin's words, an "anti-literary attitude." (p. 230)

Beckett was first a poet, then a novelist as well as playwright. Ionesco still writes short stories. Other absurdist also have pursued some literary activity. Are they really anti-literary? Ionesco frequently becomes quite lyric. Arrabal's Orison out-talks Shaw's most discursive plays. Orison requires no physical activity. It is just a discussion about the motives behind a decision made before the play begins. Pinter's The Dwarfs was adapted from an unfinished novel into a radio play. Beckett's Embers and All That Fall are also radio plays, as are his Cascando and Words and Music, which require only voices and music. His Play explicitly prohibits physical movements, facial expressions, and even vocal expression. Except for the urns which cover the characters' bodies, there are no costumes, scenery or props. The play is literally nothing but words delivered in monotone. Certain comments

on life and death are even relatively clearly articulated.

The best absurdist plays contain passages of quite effective prose, sometimes heightened by a poetic quality. Waiting for Godot is frequently garnered for memorable passages, but gems may be gleaned from Beckett's other plays as well. Dan and Maddie Rooney in All That Fall represent provincial, homely types, but they speak beautifully; perhaps they are inspired by the Irish in them or their creator. Dan positively relishes his words as he recalls contemplating enduring a day at home.

On the other hand, I said, there are the horrors of home life, the dusting, sweeping, airing, scrubbing, waxing, waning, washing, mangling, drying, mowing, clipping, raking, rolling, scuffling, shovelling, grinding, tearing, pounding, banging and slamming. And the brats, the happy little hearty little howling neighbours' brats. (pp. 78-79)

The absurdist in many plays explicitly convey thematic material by means of the dialogue. The technique, developed in nineteenth-century French plays, of using an authorial raisonneur, a character designed to spout the dramatist's dictums, is never adopted by the absurdist, but from time to time the playwrights do seem to verbally articulate their own opinions. For instance, Pinget's Levert in The Dead Letter tells the Barman, "We never know anyone,"²² thus verbalizing an absurdist precept involving the themes of isolation, communication, and identity. Many of the examples illustrating absurdist themes are drawn from speeches, not acts. Easlin perhaps exaggerates in asserting

²²tr. Barbara Bray, Plays, I, p. 99.

The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being--that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence. This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet... (p. xx)

One might add that this is also the difference between much mediocre drama and most great drama. For, while few playwrights altogether avoid discussing their themes in the guise of dialogue, no fine playwright can afford to forget to dramatize his theme. This is the formal means which reflects the content in the best plays, and such an inextricable relationship between form and content is not only not limited to absurdist plays, but is also not characteristic of the drama alone among the arts. It is the province of any artist to express content by means of form. Content and form in the arts are, in fact, one and the same. The stimulus of an aesthetic response, as opposed to an analytic one, depends upon their union.

Aestheticians and artists have found not only the union of form and content but also the sensuous communication of an idea characteristic not merely of absurdist drama but of all drama and of music, the plastic arts, and literature. Particular methods already discussed in these pages are characteristic of the absurdists, but they may likewise be employed by other playwrights. The basic principles exploited by the absurdists are those of all art.

These contentions are supported by many writers. First on the communication of content by means of form, one may turn to critics Una-Ellis-Fermor and John Simon and to novelist Joseph Conrad for confirmation.

Una Ellis-Fermor, writing on Shakespeare's success in achieving such formal expression in Troilus and Cressida, observes, "The subduing of content to form is no mere act of virtuosity; it has a further significance as an instance of one of the ultimate functions of art."²³ John Simon, criticizing a contemporary play, agrees.²⁴ Joseph Conrad finds the union of form and content important in all the arts and urges the novelist to display "unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance..."²⁵ Conrad urges the novelist to suggest the meaning by the sound of the word chosen, and Samuel Beckett expresses exactly the same opinion about the task of any great artist who uses words. Writing about James Joyce he notes that for that writer "form is content, content is form...When the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep...When the sense is dancing, the words dance."²⁶ Nor, he adds, is Joyce the only writer to achieve "sensuous suggestion" in his use of language; the great writers strive for this effect.

Shakespeare uses fat, greasy words to express corruption: "Duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed that rots itself in death on Lethe wharf". We hear the ooze squelching all through Dicker's description of the Thames in "Great Expectations". (p. 15)

²³The Frontiers of Drama (New York, 1946), p. 72.

²⁴"Theatre Chronicle," Hudson Review, XV (Summer 1962), 273.

²⁵"Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus," A Conrad Argosy (Garden City, New York, 1942), p. 82.

²⁶"Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce," Our Examination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress (London), p. 15.

Had Beckett been writing a few years later he might have seen fit to include his contemporary Dylan Thomas as another past master at "sensuous suggestion" by means of careful word choice. His Under Milkwood is as vivid as a radio play can be.

Words are not the only means of sensuously communicating in the theatre, but before pursuing this matter of sensuousity any further, what opinion do other absurdist express on the relation of form and content? Albee, speaking, not of absurdist drama, but of all art, comments, "Style and content codetermine each other."²⁷ The corollary proposition, is, of course, that style and content are inseparable. Therefore paraphrase of an artist's meaning is unsatisfactory or even impossible.

I would think that if a play can be stated in a couple of sentences that should be the length of the play. One writer was asked to explain one of his books and he took a copy down and started reading, and he said, "I will stop when I get to the last page of the book, and that's what it's about. (p. 65)

Other absurdist comment on the form and content relationship, but Ionesco is by far the most vocal of the group. No other twentieth-century dramatist has endeavored any more strenuously to articulate his ideas on the aesthetics of the drama. Although Ionesco's essays are especially valuable in revealing his ideas on this subject, he even satirizes in Improvisation those hair-splitting critics who attempt to separate the inseparable.

²⁷"John Gielgud and Edward Albee Talk About the Theater," Atlantic, CXV (April 1965), 61.

Bart I: We children of the scientific age,
one day we'll learn how to distinguish the
form of fire from its content.

Bart III: The form of wind...

Bart II:...from the content of wind...

Bart I: The form of water...

Bart II:...from the content of water...(p. 140)

In an interview Ionesco explains by means of an analogy his frustration at such quibbling.

"Isn't it true," I ask, "that the world is awful?" The specialist answers, "Why do you stress the first syllable so strongly when you say 'awful'?"²⁸

Ionesco directly asserts the union of form and content in a number of essays.²⁹

If Ionesco is interested in the expression of content by means of form, he is doubly concerned that this expression appeal to emotions by means of the senses. He finds emphasis on "discursive thought" out of place in the theatre.³⁰ He repeatedly complains of playwrights who believe that a play is a treatise. A play must not "be confused with a novel written in dialogue, or with a sermon, a lesson, a speech or an ode..."³¹ He announces abhorrence of sermons or speeches disguised as

²⁸"An Interview with Ionesco," by Richard Schechner, tr. Leonard C. Pronko, Tulane Drama Review, VII (Spring 1963), 168.

²⁹See, for example, "In Defense of Roland Dubillard, Weingarten, and Some Others," Notes and..., p. 44; "Hearts Are Not Worn on the Sleeve," Notes and..., pp. 101-102; "In the Long Run I Am for Classicism," Notes and..., p. 129.

³⁰"Theatre from Within," Notes and..., pp. 223-224.

³¹"An Address Delivered to a Gathering of French and German Writers," Notes and..., p. 147.

plays. The pulpit and the platform are the proper domains of the orator.³²

He berates those who would make the drama discursive:

For these "specialists" the theatre, being something different from the theatre, is ideology, allegory, politics, lectures, essays or literature. This is as much an aberration as it would be to claim that music was archaeology, that painting was physics or mathematics; and tennis anything you like but tennis. (p. 34)

Ionesco is not merely concerned with what drama is not, nor is he announcing a manifesto of new, avant-garde principles. He admires, as creators of real plays, dramatists of all ages, including such figures of great stature as Sophocles and Shakespeare, and he believes that he himself is simply an adherent of classical traditions. In describing what drama is, he stresses that it and all the arts appeal to the emotions, not directly to the mind. He explains, paraphrasing Croce, "Creation...is an entirely different procedure from that involved in conceptual thought. There are two ways of knowing: logical, and aesthetic or intuitive." ("In the Long Run I Am for Classicism," p. 129) Intuitive or aesthetic knowledge reaches a man through emotional experience.³³ Note that Ionesco finds this true of all aesthetic experience, not just of the experience of an absurdist play.

Martin Esslin has read in Ionesco's essays what he seems to regard as a new artistic credo. Esslin is pleased with absurdist drama because

³²"Experience of the Theatre," Notes and..., p. 24.

³³See "Hearts Are Not Worn on the Sleeve," p. 102 and "Experience of the Theatre," p. 32.

in trying to deal with the ultimates of the human condition not in terms of intellectual understanding but in terms of communicating a metaphysical truth through a living experience, the Theatre of the Absurd touches the religious. There is a vast difference between knowing something to be the case in the conceptual sphere and experiencing it as a living reality. (p. 312)

But what Esslin calls the "religious" sphere Ionesco regards as the province of all art: intuitive perception by means of emotional experience. Thus when Esslin praises The Killer as an "experience," (p. 134) he is merely conveying to Ionesco the fact that the latter has written a play! And when Esslin praises the absurdists for achieving "a purely poetic, as distinct from discursive, use of dramatic dialogue..." (p. 173) he is simply acknowledging what is, to the absurdists and many aestheticians, the obvious fact that playwrights write plays and not tracts, treatises, pamphlets, or polemics.

The premise that drama relies primarily on a sensuous, non-discursive communication through emotional channels is not only supported by Ionesco and Croce. Other expressions of this view may be examined. Since Susanne Langer devoted a great many pages to expounding this principle, one might do well to begin with her Feeling and Form. Miss Langer explains that for her theory of art

the basic concept is the articulate but non-discursive form having import without conventional reference, and therefore presenting itself not as a symbol in the ordinary sense but as a "significant form," in which the factor of significance is not logically discriminated,

but is felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function.³⁴

The non-discursive artistic symbol conveys meaning, or "vital import," (p. 52) by means of its structure, which, in the case of poesis, creates a "virtual life." (p. 212) Poesis, if it is literature, creates a "virtual past," but if it is drama it creates a "virtual future." (pp. 266-267) In either case, although words (discourse) are employed, these are only a means to a non-discursive or aesthetic end. (See pp. 211, 227, 288-289) This end is virtual experience, intuitively apprehended. The artist "is not saying anything, not even about the nature of feeling; he is showing. He is showing us the appearance of feeling, in a perceptible symbolic projection..." (p. 394. See also p. 397) Oddly enough, this statement about all art is very close to Esslin's previously quoted proposition that absurdist theatre is closer to the religious in this respect than to art.

Miss Langer examines the sensuous means open to the dramatist. She proposes that words are not the primary method employed by the playwright. The act is the mode of the drama. (p. 266) She likewise seems to feel that a play is wrought, not written, and therefore, that it is primarily structured rather than verbalized. Thus, in her discussion of genre, she defines tragedy as a structure which evokes fate by means of an inevitable action culminating with finality and she describes comedy as a structure which evokes fortune by means of contrivances or a series

³⁴ (New York, 1953), p. 32. All subsequent quotations from Feeling and Form will be from this edition.

of accidents not developed, in Aristotelean terms, according to strict probability and necessity. The formal structure of each genre reflects the tone or meaning imposed on life in each sort of play.

Although Susanne Langer stresses structure and action in the drama, other sensuous means are, of course, open to the playwright. Marvin Rosenberg has written an entire article on the non-verbal languages of the theatre.³⁵ He cites a number of possibilities of visual language and non-verbal sounds effectively employed in the theatre, and he derives many of his examples from Shakespeare and other pre-modern dramatists. Ionesco stresses that every means available in the theatre is useful. ("Experience of the Theatre," p. 29; "Brief Notes for Radio," p. 137) And, although physical methods are important, words themselves nearly always are still an important means of sensuous expression. The dramatist using words might remember the advice of Joseph Conrad and the dictum of Immanuel Kant. The former writes, "All art...appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions." (p. 82) Kant explains that artistic form is the only adequate representation of an artist's "aesthetical idea," an idea which cannot be paraphrased as a simple "concept."³⁶ Paraphrase is an inadequate expression of the "rational

³⁵"The Languages of Drama," Educational Theatre Journal, XV (March 1963), 1-6.

³⁶Critique of Judgment, tr. J. H. Bernard (New York, 1951), pp. 157-158.

ideas" which the poet "ventures to realize to sense..." (pp. 157-158) or of the poet's sensuous rendering of speculative thought. ("Der Dichter wagt es, Vernunftsideen von unsichtbaren Wesen, das Reich der Seligen, das Höllenreich, die Ewigkeit, die Schöpfung u. dgl. zu versinnlichen."³⁷)

The theory seems to indicate that the absurdists are far from alone in their expression of content by means of form. The practice confirms this supposition. Robert Brustein finds in the "unconnected" form of Büchner's Woyzeck evocation of the world's "dislocation." (p. 236) Richard Samuel and R. Hinton Thomas see in the form of the expressionists' plays a reflection of their themes.³⁸ Sartre, in What is Literature?, asserts that in all literature "form and content...are identical..." (p. 154) He expresses his concern with existential choices by structuring his plays so as to confront his characters with significant decisions. In parody or burlesque, the exaggeration also comments on the subject matter.

Greek tragedians structured their plays so as to reflect whatever view of the world they wished to embody in each play. H. D. F. Kitto derives his interpretations of Greek tragedies from their "style and form" as he explains in his Form and Meaning in Drama (London, 1960), p. 91. In his Greek Tragedy he asserts that a tragic theme is so well

³⁷Rene Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism, (London, 1955), I, 333, or p. 194 in the 1790 edition.

³⁸Expressionism in German Life, Literature and the Theatre (Cambridge, 1939), p. 41.

embodied in its plot that, were the lines omitted, the meaning would still be "woven into the structure itself." (pp. 382-383) Applying this principle, he assumes that Sophocles structured his Ajax as he did in order to express his theme, and not because he was incapable of killing off his hero and concluding his story simultaneously. He likewise interprets the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides by taking into consideration the import of each play's construction. He finds this method especially useful in explaining certain Euripidean practices contrary to Aristotle's principles. Kitto justifies the deus ex machina in Medea and the seeming lack of unity in Andromache on this basis.

William Arrowsmith pursues the interpretation of Euripides' plays by a careful examination of the plot construction. He suggests "a theory of Euripidean structure which starts from dislocation and attempts to show the relation of this form to a world of moral disorder,"³⁹ proceeding with the aid of this theory to attack some hitherto inexplicable plays. He explains the Orestes. He explicates particularly well the unusual Heracles, the two parts of which are connected by "neither causal necessity nor even probability."⁴⁰ This omission of connection is seen as a deliberate comment on such omissions in the peculiar workings of human destiny. The hero is deliberately given an opportunity to demonstrate

³⁹"The Criticism of Greek Tragedy," The Art of the Theatre, p. 53.

⁴⁰"Introduction to Heracles," The Complete Greek Tragedies, III (Chicago, 1959), p. 268.

his heroism by withstanding the most incredibly unexpected adversity.⁴¹

The theme is that which is revealed by the formal techniques utilized by the dramatist. Perhaps the unusual feature of the absurdist relationship between form and content is that the usual play tends to reflect order in life, whereas the absurdist play generally reflects disorder. That other plays also express some sort of chaos is evident from the example of Heracles.

⁴¹See "The Criticism of Greek Tragedy," pp. 43-44.

THE ABSURDISTS ON THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Every effort to easily define the theatre of the absurd seems to have failed. Tendencies are noticeable, but considerable diversity of practice prevails. Certain key factors still may be noted as useful, but first one more difficulty must at least be mentioned. This is the fact, annoying to the isimist, that several of the absurdists are not eager to be spoken of as a group of similar playwrights writing similar plays, and the corollary annoyance that a few dramatists even protest that they do not, in fact, find the world absurd.

The voluble Ionesco has, characteristically, written the most on these points, and, again characteristically, he seems to have contradicted himself. In "The Outrageous Ionesco" he asserts, "The only absurd thing is life itself."¹ But in "Interview with Edith Mora," he calls conceiving of life as absurd "far too fashionable," and explains that life is logical, not absurd in any way, but that consciousness of life is "astonishing." (p. 121) Yet he expresses pessimism, even despair, in several other essays.² In "The World of Ionesco," he speaks of the necessity of men being either unhappy (metaphysically unhappy) or stupid." (p. 481)

Esslin's quotation of Ionesco's definition of the word "absurd" at first appears useful in attempting to understand this playwright's position.

¹Interview with Rosette Lamont, Horizon, III (May 1961), 93.

²See "Further Notes," Notes and..., p. 227 and "When I Write," Notes and..., p. 154.

Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless. (p. xix)

Esslin does note that the quotation is from an essay on Kafka. But what he fails to mention is that the quotation is about the absurd in Kafka's work, not in the world, and, what is also not at all clear from this out of context excerpt, that the quotation is part of an attempt to demonstrate "the profoundly religious character of all Kafka's work."³

In "My Plays and I" Ionesco acknowledges the dual nature of his perception of the world. He speaks of living in a world "in which all human behavior tells of absurdity and all history of absolute futility..."⁴ In this same essay Ionesco speaks of transcending the absurd, and, in a rare moment, sounds much like Camus. He does note, however, that transcendence of the absurd is "very rare" and does not last long.

Ionesco's prevailing mood is thus a bleak one. He is much like Choubert, who, in Victims of Duty, momentarily rises above his despair and discovers that he can fly. However, Choubert rapidly grows ill, loses his nerve, and jumps ignominiously into the waste basket.

Ionesco's major objection to being classified as an absurdist is not abhorrence of being associated with the term absurd, but rather uneasiness at the sort of usage which the term is receiving. "It is vague enough now...to mean nothing any more and to be an easy definition of anything..."⁵

³"By Way of Postscript," Notes and..., pp. 256-27.

⁴Notes and..., p. 163.

⁵"Cerisy-La-Salle, August 1953," Notes and..., pp. 216-217.

Beckett is quoted by William York Tindall as rejecting the absurdist classification for his own plays, (p. 12) but another writer quotes him as calling his subject "distress."⁶ (According to Carlos Lynes, p. 55) Adamov's attitude toward the label also is ambivalent as is Albee's.⁷

The term absurdist can certainly still be useful to critics, but Ionesco's objection that the term means nothing but is applied to anything is a wise one to remember. And the absurdist, who never have banded together and issued joint manifestoes expressing common objectives in the manner of the surrealists, should not be required to write plays that are just alike. Albee warns that the playwrights "represent a group only in the sense that they seem to be doing something of the same thing in vaguely similar ways at approximately the same time..." (p. 30) Well he might issue such a warning, for Tom Driver criticizes Albee for "failure to maintain the chosen convention" in The American Dream,⁸ as though Albee were duty-bound to follow an absurdist recipe. Even Esslin is guilty of the same kind of criticism. He berates Jack Gelber's The Connection for foundering "in its uncertainty as to which convention it belongs to..." (p. 227) Critics are free to invent labels, but they must not require that plays never squirm out from under them.

⁶Tom F. Driver "Beckett by the Madeleine," Drama in the Modern World, ed. Samuel A. Weiss (Boston, 1964), p. 507.

⁷"Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?" New York Times (February 25, 1962), 30.

⁸"What's the Matter with Edward Albee?" Reporter, XXX (January 2, 1964), 38.

CONCLUSION

Without question Martin Esslin went far on the path of propounding a useful definition of the theatre of the absurd. The difficulties of such a task are great. Perhaps refinements in his definition may be made by one who considers these premises:

(1) The style of the absurdists varies greatly not only from playwright to playwright and from play to play, but from scene to scene and moment to moment. Absurdists employ techniques derived from traditional Occidental drama, including those of fantasy, allegory, symbolism, farce, satire, parody, drama, melodrama, expressionism, surrealism, Dada, and realism.

(2) Although the techniques of other styles of playwriting are used, they are employed in order to convey some notion of the insecurity which pervades life, whether the wacky whimsy which Simpson discerns or the bleaker "mess" perceived by Beckett (Driver, pp. 505-506) or some degree of or combination of these poses.

(3) The absurdists tend to view theme as the object of the dramatist and every theatrical method of conveying theme as the means at the disposal of the dramatist's skill and imagination. The primary object of the dramatist is not story-telling or psychological portraiture. It is not, on the other hand, preaching. It is dramatization.

(4) Themes conveyed by the absurdists are not necessarily all dramatized in any one play, but frequently several themes are dramatized at once and all absurdist themes are likely to be present in the entire absurdist oeuvre of any of the absurdist playwrights.

(5) The absurdist playwrights are not a school of playwrights co-operating in an autonomous movement. They do not compose plays according to some absurdist recipe. They do not necessarily despair of ever finding meaning in life; they only dramatize its absence.

In A Resounding Tinkle critic Pepper warns his bewildered cohorts

I think we're quite wrong to be discussing this play or whatever it is as if it were The Comedy of Errors rewritten by Lewis Carroll to provide a part for Godot or somebody. (p. 136)

But this advice may be mistaken. The approach described has the merit of being eclectic. And awareness of its eclecticism is one necessary pass-key to that elusive realm, the theatre of the absurd.

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APPENDIX

Following is a list of critics and theorists who analyze the comic as the incongruous and/or the surprising. Included are particularly important quotations and page references.

- Addison, Joseph. "The Spectator, 62, Friday, May 11, 1711," The Spectator, ed. G. Gregory Smith. London: J. M. Dent and Co., n. d., I, 231-237. See pp. 232, 237.
- Aristoteles. The "Art" of Rhetoric, tr. John Henry Freese. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1926. "Most smart sayings are derived from metaphor, and also from misleading the hearer beforehand... the conclusion turns out contrary to his expectation... And what Theodous calls 'novel expressions' arise when what follows is paradoxical, and, as he puts it, not in accordance with our previous expectation..." III, ii, 5-6, p. 409.
- Aristotle. "The Poetics," Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden, ed. Allan H. Gilbert. New York: American Book Company, 1940, pp. 69-124. See Ch. V, 49a31, p. 74. Although primarily the basis for the somewhat unpopular theory of superiority, this passage also implies some recognition of an incongruity or contrast between the normal or ideal and the painless fault or deformity.
- Auden, W. H. "Notes on the Comic," Comedy: Meaning and Form, ed. Robert W. Corrigan. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965, pp. 61-72. See p. 61.
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- Darwin, Charles. The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1873. "...something unexpected-- a novel or incongruous idea which breaks through an habitual train of thought--appears to be a strong element in the ludicrous." p. 202. See also p. 200.

- Eastman, Max. Enjoyment of Laughter. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937. See p. 38.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Comic," Letters and Social Aims, Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, IV. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882, 127-140. "The essence of all joke, of all comedy, seems to be an honest or well-intended halfness; a non-performance of what is pretended to be performed, at the same time that one is giving loud pledges of performance. The balking of the intellect, the frustrated expectation, the break of continuity in the intellect, is comedy...." p. 127.
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"The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of ... incongruity..." I, 76. See also II, 270-284.
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See p. 65.
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THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD:
ITS THEMES AND FORM

by

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A. B., Sweet Briar College, 1963

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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This study attempts to reevaluate the term "theatre of the absurd." Two general areas are investigated, and in each certain oversimplified judgments by previous critics are examined and rejected.

First are catalogued and illustrated the commonly recurring themes in certain plays by Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, N. F. Simpson, Robert Pinget, Arrabal, Arthur Adamov, Arthur Kopit, and Edward Albee. The attitude that life is meaningless, purposeless, and thus absurd is found to be communicated in these plays by the dramatization of the following specific themes: the inability to act and the futility of action; the inevitability of death; the pervasiveness of uncertainty; the vitiation of values; the danger of conformity or an unstable identity; non-communication and isolation; and emotional atrophy. The value of this thematic catalogue is then illustrated by its use as a criterion for excluding from the absurdist canon plays by three playwrights of stature whose work has erroneously been labelled absurdist. The metaphysics of Jean Genet, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre are concepts which clearly should not be confused with the philosophical stance of the absurdists. Valuable as the thematic catalogue may be in the examination of plays obviously either absurdist or non-absurdist, a short section is devoted to suggesting the difficulty of using a solely thematic analysis for the purpose of evaluating the place of many other plays in which absurdist themes may be dramatized, but not by means of techniques which seem unique with absurdists.

Second, since themes alone are not necessarily a sufficient index for the measurement of absurdist propensities in a given play, consideration

is devoted to possible means of defining absurdist plays on the basis of their form and techniques. Examined as possible unique and therefore defining characteristics are the type of plot, characters, and dialogue; the methods of comic technique; and the reflection of themes in the form and techniques. Since none of these standards proves entirely reliable, the reluctance of some absurdist to be given the absurdist label is noted. A label at once elusive and popular is found dangerous by playwrights who hope not to have their plays ridiculously oversimplified.

The conclusion of this analysis must be that efforts to provide a simple definition of the theatre of the absurd tend to reduce individual plays by individual playwrights to entirely too simple and too neat specifications imposed from without. On the other hand, thematic comparisons between absurdist plays may elucidate otherwise elusive thematic import, and efforts to discover a basis for valid formal comparisons may yet be rewarded if attempts to formulate sweeping generalizations are regarded with suspicion.