CHAPTER FOUR

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The Absurd dramatists, without constituting a well-defined movement or backed by any revolutionary manifesto, hold up a mirror to the obsessive concerns of modern man, who deprived of his former certitude grounded in faith in God, attempts to live with dignity in a disintegrated world. This new consciousness of the essential loneliness of man, the meaninglessness and futility of human life is explicitly stated by Albert Camus in 'The Myth of Sisyphus' in which he examines the malaise of the human situation.

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusion and light, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of Absurdity."

"Absurd" is used here in the sense of being devoid of purpose, senseless, useless - because man has been severed from his roots in religion, and all values have collapsed. During the two world wars new gods and new religions were thrust upon mankind but this resulted in further accentuating the feeling of emptiness, loneliness and absurdity. This anguish at the casualness, chanciness, accidentalness
of life has been expressed by Shakespeare in Hamlet when Horatio's anguished words bring the action of the play to an end:

So shall you hear
Of casual, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fallen on the inventors' heads: ...  

Talking about the senselessness in life as perceived by the Absurdists, J.R. Styxan puts the matter picturesquely:

Under these circumstances, if a tile falls off a roof and kills me, it is much the same as if an atomic bomb had been dropped. Of the tile, the only complaint I can make is that it should have fallen on you and not on me; an atomic bomb would have been less partial. And perhaps the only fact in either case that the human intelligence can grapple with, albeit inadequately, is the fact of death itself.

This metaphysical anguish is also shared by existentialists like Sartre and Camus, and Jean Anouilh, Giraudoux and others but their new awareness finds dramatic expression in old dramatic conventions. Sartre and Camus explain in a highly logical and lucid language the condition of modern man and then write, as it were, thesis plays to prove their point dramatically. The lasting contribution of the Absurd dramatists to the ART OF DRAMA
is that they search for new forms, new modes of communication to embody their new consciousness. The Absurdist like true dramatic poets do not argue their points but present their vision as living experience in definite plastic stage images or patterns consisting of such images and human situations.

The vision of the Absurdist about the ultimate reality arises from the depths of his being, his dreams, fantasies and nightmares. It is the inner world he explores and he is not concerned with discussing the problems of character, motivation or dramatic conflict. The events in their sequence, plot and action in their traditional sense do not interest him. He does not tell a story to communicate a moral. The action in an Absurdist play consists of a sequence of poetic images forming a pattern and it is in this unfolding of the pattern that there is some kind of suspense. Waiting for Godot has no plot but there is a pendulum-like to and fro movement weaving a complex pattern of images of "nothing really ever happens," of everlasting waiting for something to turn up. Since the Theatre of the Absurd abandons character, psychology, characterization, plot construction and other conventions of traditional drama and communicates the dramatic experience in terms of stage images in complex patterns, it cannot be a long drawn out complex structure. If it could it would communicate its meaning in a flash. That explains why most of the Absurd
plays are short, one-act affairs. Whenever a three act play has been attempted the play begins to stagger at the end as if out of fatigue. Ionesco's Antigone is a case in point. The third act petera out into a Kafka-like phantasmagoria. His Rhinoceros too seems to be a long drawn-out affair. Genet's The Balcony has a very lengthy last scene which does seem to be collapsing under its own weight. Beckett's plays, on the other hand, show a progressive diminution. Waiting for Godot and All that Fall are two full length plays which could be presented on the stage and on the radio respectively. Most of his plays are playlets which could fill the time gaps between two stage events.

What puts the Absurdists apart from the other dramatists is their attitude towards language. It is not that there is a total devaluation and disintegration of language in the drama of the Absurd. Rather, they make a new use of language to enhance the total poetry of the theatre. Language becomes an element, not necessarily a predominant one, which in harmony with other elements of the theatre must create poetry of the theatre instead of poetry in the theatre. Sometimes they denude language of all its superficialities and create poetry out of its stark naked bareness. While other times they stretch it, distort it and let it meander aimlessly floating on the waves of free association, away from reality, yet heightening reality.
Take for instance, *Jacques or Obedience*, a play by Ionesco:

You can't love your parents any more, your clothes, your sister, your grandmother. Don't you remember, my boy, remember how I bottlefed you, how I left you to dry in your nappy, just like your sister... Didn't I, child?... You see, you see, I was the one, my boy, who gave you your first spanking; not your father, father over there who could have done it better. He's stronger than me. No, I was the one, because I loved you too much. And it was I who made you go without your pudding, and who kissed you, looked after you, trained you, and taught you how to ameliorate, to violate, to articulate, and who brought you such nice things to eat in your stockings. I taught you how to climb the stairs (when there were any), how to rub your knees with nettles when you wanted to be stung. I've been more than a mother to you, I've been a bosom pal, a husband, a husky, a cronie, a goose. Nothing has stood in my way. I surmounted every obstacle, every barricade, to satisfy your childish whims and fancies. Oh, ungrateful boy, you don't even remember when I used to take you on my lap, and pull your pretty little teeth and your toenails out to make you extermine like a calf, a lonely little calf. What an unhappy mother I am! I've brought a monster into the world, and you are the monster. Here, your grandmother wants to talk to you. She is tottery. She is octogenarian; perhaps she can move you by her age, her past, her future.

In the multi-dimensional poetic imagery of the stage, language becomes, in the hands of the Absurdists, a component, sometimes in command, sometimes as a counterpoint to the language of the scene by reducing itself to meaningless patter. By freeing themselves from the tyranny of the traditional dramatic language the Absurdists have not only opened up a new dimension of the stage but have launched
themselves into uncharted courses. It is to be seen whether this new freedom with the language leads towards mime or the mumble-jumble incantation of the subjectivism. The dangers of subjectivism as brought out by the Tynan-Ionesco controversy of 1958 are always to be kept in mind. In their attitude towards language and other theatrical means of communication, the Absurdist show a great deal of the influence of Antonin Artaud:

That is to say: instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theatre to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought.

This language cannot be defined except by its possibilities of dynamic expression in space as opposed to the expressive possibilities of spoken dialogue. And what the theatre can still take over from speech are its possibilities for extension beyond words, for development in space, for dissociative and vibratory action upon the sensibility. This is the hour of intonations, of a word's particular pronunciation. Here too intervenes (besides the auditory language of sounds) the visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures, but on condition that their meanings, their physiognomies, their combinations be carried to the point of becoming signs, making a kind of alphabet out of these signs. Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theatre must organise it into veritable hieroglyphs....

In order to arouse the dull sensibilities of the audience, the Absurdist confront them with a grotesquely heightened and distorted picture of the mad mad world.
The motives and actions of the characters remain incomprehensible to the audience. Such characters are comic but cause you to shed tears. Like a child’s one's laughter is mixed with one's tears. It is a tragic comic danse macabre.

A play might begin as innocently as Ionesco’s The Chairs yet the end might be totally unexpected and shocking. Similarly The Chairs begins with the innocent baby-talk of the old couple but ends in their suicide — when silence becomes shriekingly loud and nothingness is concretized. Genet leads us to a palace of mirrors where we find our own images distorted and brutalized, as in The Blacks. Waiting for Godot opens with the clownish cross-talk and ends with the trouser joke, though much has happened since then. The Absurdist bring the circus, the music hall, the Commedia Dell’Arte and the charade to their aid in order to communicate the grimness of their theme to the audience, though, through the smokescreen of comicality and absurdity.

But the nature of their dramatic conventions — the unfolding of the complex pattern of the stage images, the intensification of action to paroxysm, the pendulum-like movement of the action, the flow of spectacles — is such that Absurd drama can exist successfully only if it is a short compact structure. A circus joke, however funny and grim, has to be told in one continuous breath, as we shall examine in some of the Absurd plays.
Notes

