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ONE WAY PENDULUM

(The Absurd in the World and the Theatre)

by

Ace Pilkington

An honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

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I. Definitions

This paper is about human relation with and reaction to the Absurd. The Absurd seen in terms of the theatre, and the Absurd in relation to human images. The "Absurd" is not easy to define; it is more a condition than a concept--understood more easily by reference to an extensive body of metaphor. Ionesco calls it "... that which is devoid of purpose Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost" ¹ Which is not so much a definition as an evocation of a mood, a mood that comes from living in a world or observing one on stage. In this sense the Theatre of the Absurd creates a metaphor for the world (as in the plays of Ionesco, Pinter, and Beckett) and not a representation of the world. And also in this sense the Theatre of the Absurd is at once the most compact and the most complete image of the Absurd.

The term "Theatre of the Absurd" is most often used to mean those cases "... when the playwright attempts to give expression to the absurd through both the structure and the language of his work" ² This conventional terminology is not a definition but a category, used to separate the "non-classical" work of playwrights such as Beckett,

¹Quoted in Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1969), p. 5.

²Joyce Carol Oates, The Edge of Impossibility: Tragic Forms in Literature, (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1972), p. 105.

Pinter, Ionesco, and Simpson from the "classical" work of playwrights such as Sartre, Camus, and Albee.³ It allows scholars to limit their area of study. However, since this paper is concerned primarily with development and content and only secondarily with form, both Theatre of the Absurd and Absurd Drama (used to signify the more "classical" drama) will be dealt with.

II. Literary beginnings

The world of the Absurd and metaphors for it had appeared in literature before they were placed on the stage. In To Deny Our Nothingness and Problematic Rebel,⁴ Maurice Friedman discusses a number of writers who had dealt with the Absurd and who established a foundation for the Existentialists and playwrights that came later. Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure and Friedrich Nietzsche's Zarathustra both experienced the loss of the ordering God and the resultant alienation.⁵ Melville presents a nonhuman world "... which is either malignant and hostile, as Moby Dick appears to Ahab, or heartless and indifferent, as the universe appears to Ishmael."⁶ Ahab's alienation from the non-human world "... leads, by way of his Promethean defiance, to an alienation from other men" ⁷ He becomes that most common image of man

³Esslin, Theatre, pp. 5-6.

⁴Maurice Friedman, To Deny Our Nothingness: Contemporary Images of Man (New York: Delacorte Press, 1967); and Problematic Rebel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

⁵Friedman, Problematic Rebel, p. 459.

⁶Ibid., p. 437.

⁷Ibid., p. 437.

in the Absurd world, the exile--even though his rebellion is driving him toward something and not away from it he is an exile, separated from the world and from humanness. This kind of character is even more pronounced in the work of Dostoievsky. "From underneath his famous rebels an exile always peers forth."⁸

Friedman is able to show a great deal of his image of man in the Absurd World--the "Problematic Rebel" by using the work of Melville and Dostoievsky. In the nineteenth century the reasonableness of the world and the rightness of man's place in it were being questioned and a body of work was written which was an image of the Absurd--an expression of those feelings of lostness and rebellion in the face of a universe which was, at best, indifferent.

III. Earlier drama

Elements of the Absurd, some of its attitudes and some of its problems have been expressed in earlier drama. As far back as Sophocles' Oedipus The King there is an expression of basic distrust in the order, a feeling that the world is not designed for man:

O generations of men, how I
count you as equal with those who live
not at all!
What man, what man on earth wins more
of happiness than a seeming . . .⁹

Admittedly this is only a suggestion of the Absurd. It is a tragedy in a structured universe but there is a suggestion that, at least for man, the structure is meaningless.

⁸ Ibid., p. 441.

⁹ Sophocles, Oedipus The King, David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., Greek Tragedies (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 164, 11, 1187-1191.

Roman comedy contains an even stronger suggestion of meaningless structure. The very devices¹⁰ of the drama suggest an Absurd world: identities are easily changed, violent sexual attacks are accepted as normal--they are used to create a whole series of happy marriages. The sexual relation disintegrates to casual ritual. There is order in this Roman stage world, effect follows cause with perfect regularity, but it is not a world in which human beings can feel at home. In fact, human beings tend to lose their individual humanness as in Plautus' The Twin Menaechmi where the two similar characters are distinguished more by their entrances and exits than by anything else.¹¹ The observation made by a number of critics that Roman drama has a modern flavour, seems justified. The Roman world certainly had elements of the Absurd and Roman comedy tends to reflect those elements.

In Shakespeare's King Lear we are presented with a world where humans are destroyed by beasts in human shape, where abject appeals to the gods are useless or achieve their opposite and where Lear calls down destruction on the order of the world because it has gone awry. Despite the hopeful elements of the play, there is enough of pessimism to bring the universe into question and put the shadow of the Absurd on stage.

In the work of George Büchner the Absurd is a good deal more than shadow. Büchner's Woyzeck presents a terribly small hero who is

¹⁰For a general discussion of Roman drama see Allardyce Nicoll, World Drama: From Aeschylus to Anouilh (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1949), pp. 117-142; and George Freedley and John A. Reeves, A History of the Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, 1941), pp. 32-48.

¹¹Plautus, The Twin Menaechmi, in Roman Comedies, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), pp. 55-107.

surrounded by violence and nightmare. A man who is the object of grotesque "scientific" experiments, whose firmest contact with reality and with other men is the pain of torture.¹² Chekhov's plays are theatre of the Absurd in the most unconventional sense of that term.¹³ Unlike most plays of the genre, Chekhov's work allows no catharsis, no meaningful climax. In Uncle Vanya, the only play where an enemy is even discovered, the "hero" is not only unable to kill him but is also unable to accomplish his own death.¹⁴ And Bernard Shaw in the explosions of Heartbreak House presents us with a vision of man totally inadequate for the earth, "Either out of that darkness some new creation will come to supplant us as we have supplanted the animals, or the heavens will fall in thunder and destroy us."¹⁵ In short, the devices of the Absurd had been used before, the theatre was ready.

IV. Recognition

In the nature of the theatre, the simplest treatment of the Absurd is a recognition of the Absurd by the playwright which he communicates to the audience. There is no need for complexity of characterization--the characters can be static throughout the play--unchanging images that result in a conclusion drawn by the audience. The characters need not

¹²George Buchner, Woyzeck (New York: Avon Books, 1969).

¹³Oates, "Chekhov and the Theatre of the Absurd," pp. 103-123.

¹⁴Anton Chekhov, Uncle Vanya in Best Plays by Chekhov, trans. Stark Young (New York: The Modern Library, 1956), pp. 71-137.

¹⁵George Bernard Shaw, Heartbreak House, in Laurel British Drama: The Twentieth Century, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 42-137.

be unique or perceptive, all that is necessary is that the audience realize that the characters live in the world of the Absurd. The play is most often an actualization of the playwright's own discovery of the Absurd in which the audience is invited to participate.

In Luther, John Osborne deliberately goes back to the beginning, to that period of time when something was taken away from the world and what was left was the Absurd. We see Martin Luther struggling inside a great order with his own doubt, loneliness and chaos. We see that chaos move from Luther's mind into the world. The comfort of God is shattered and what remains is slaughter, isolation and a humanity not far removed from beasts. In the last minutes of the play Martin says, "I listened for God's voice, but all I could hear was my own."¹⁶ The audience is made to understand and draw conclusions about the Absurd (as none of the characters do) but above all they are made to feel an indifferent world suddenly emerging from a benevolent one.

Ionesco's Bald Soprano is not an enormous beginning but a very small, day to day, matter of fact. The characters are "... so identical that at the end of the play the curtain falls on the Browns who are repeating the opening dialogue of the play which had been assigned to the Smiths."¹⁷ They speak cliches, meaningless everyday words which finally disintegrate into a sort of subconscious violence which at least has the virtue of

¹⁶ John Osborne, Luther (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), p. 93.

¹⁷ Marshall McLuhan, From Cliche to Archetype (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), p. 4.

being understood. Reason does not function in this very properly British world--Mr. Martin and Mrs. Martin have a tremendous chain of coincidences to prove that they are man and wife but it so happens that they are not. Reality, as in the case of the Bobby Watsons,¹⁸ is all things at once. One of the Bobby Watsons has regular features and is not pretty and also has irregular features but is pretty. The frightening thing about the play, the thing which forces audiences to draw conclusions and follow the playwright in his recognition of the Absurd is the tremendous similarity of Ionesco's dialogue to what is said in daily life. "We go on speaking as if we were stricken by some sort of amnesia."¹⁹ And the characters by speaking in the same way force us to remember the world we inhabit and force us to evaluate it.

In many ways Osborne's Luther and Ionesco's Bald Soprano are structured like logical proofs with the audience compelled to fill in the conclusion. There is a more subtle form of recognition communicated by the playwright to the audience. The world constructed by the playwright when accepted at surface value, produces a sense of profound unease. The result of the unease is an analysis of the underlying structure of the playwrights' world and the result of the analysis is the recognition of the Absurd. This process is very similar to discovering the Absurd in

¹⁸ Eugene Ionesco, The Bald Soprano, in Masters of Modern Drama, eds. Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 1120-1134.

¹⁹ Wylie Sypher, Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art, quoted in McLuhan, p. 4.

the actual world--it is an individual realization not a forced reading of a presented "message." It also presupposes that the Absurd is at least subconsciously familiar to the audience--that they will recognize it without being told what it is.

Albert Camus' Cross Purpose is almost a classical tragedy in its structure. A son returns home after years of absence. He will not reveal his identity until he has made his mother and sister love him for himself. They kill him for his money and discover his identity only after his death. The elements of the Absurd which one can find in Oedipus Rex or King Lear have become the underlying substance of this tragedy. It makes the audience aware of a world empty of religion and meaning and inhospitable to man. In a discussion of their violence the Mother in the play says it directly, "... life is crueller than we." And a little later, "... there is no resting place anywhere."²⁰

Harold Pinter's The Dumb Waiter also has a conventional structure--that of the gangster story. In fact, it is the tension between the everyday casualness of the two hitmen, Gus and Ben, and the ultimate nature of their business which first indicates the Absurd. As the play progresses we see a double level of meaning. The first level is the gangster story working itself out to the expected conclusion of one hitman killing the other. The second level which fits into and helps create uneasiness on the first is the breakdown of structure--reality fraying at the edges. Things take place with the dumb waiter which cannot take place; the very language of the two men begins to lose meaning. This

²⁰ Albert Camus, Cross Purpose, in Caligula and Cross Purpose (Great Britain: New Directions, 1947), pp. 99-168.

plus "... the deliberate omission of an explanation or a motivation for the action ..." ²¹ causes a reexamination of the play which reveals the Absurd. Also revealed is a technique used by Absurdist playwrights in general and Pinter in particular--the construction of extended metaphors which also tend to reveal the world of the Absurd. The basic metaphor of The Dumb Waiter, The Room, and The Birthday Party is the warm haven of a room with the unknown and evil outside about to enter. In a sense, the plays work like poems placed on stage. The multiple interconnected meanings forming a tremendously complex image of meaninglessness.

A slightly more complex treatment of the Absurd, the next "step" in relation to it, is the near realization of the Absurd on stage. At least one character must be relatively intricate--capable of development and change. The audience will complete the realization of the Absurd with additional reflections on the predicament of the individual human in the world.

Jimmy Porter in Osborne's Look Back in Anger almost recognizes the Absurd. Jimmy is a bright young man who will not develop into a brilliant older man--he will remain mentally young, petulant, and angry. A great part of his anger comes because he is forced to remain an angry young man, forced to remain a petulant young man shouting for attention in a world that will not allow him to grow up. Jimmy Porter is surrounded by the Absurd and he reacts to it by being petulant and becoming terribly angry at his own enforced petulance. It destroys any chance he

²¹Esslin, Theatre, p. 232.

might have for a mature relation with his wife, Alison, or any other human. Jimmy almost recognizes the Absurd for what it is and by coming so close and being so angry he forces the audience to make the recognition.

O'Neill's Yank in The Hairy Ape is positively assaulted by the world of the Absurd. His humanness is denied step by brutal step beginning with the aristocratic Mildred Douglas. Yank fights back directly and is indirectly defeated. The world tightens, people don't respond and he finds there is no place in this world which belongs to him. Yank's fight for humanness ends in his death--he dies with only a partial recognition of what he has faced. The full recognition again takes place in the audience.

The full realization of the Absurd by a character or characters on stage adds a new dimension to the play and the character. We are shown a human being discovering the nonhuman world and reacting to that discovery. It also mirrors a new level in the relation between the Absurd and human beings. The Absurd is no longer something simply to recognize and wonder about, it has become something which must be actively dealt with. The audience is being presented not with a new vision but with an experience everyone must respond to in an individual way. The full recognition of the Absurd by a character on stage suggests that the feelings of alienation and purposelessness are becoming universal.

In what is probably the first character recognition play, The Flies by Jean Paul Sartre, we are presented with an imaginary, blood thirsty, God of the Flies and we are presented with people who abandon their humanity to a collective worship of guilt. Orestes recognizes this

universe of inauthenticity for what it is and his reaction is to rebel against it. He denies all order, human and divine and locks himself away inside himself--without guilt, without belief and without contact. Orestes, the partial exile, becomes, in his rebellion, the total exile.

Camus' Caligula is also a recognition character. He finds that the world is illogical, that nothing has permanent value and that death and life are equally horrible. Caligula's response is also rebellion.²² As Roman Emperor he sets out to establish logic, truth and life in the world or to destroy it in the attempt. The rest of the play is his suicide--his death revel. He kills the patricians for his sport, for their lies and for their truths. He tortures and rapes whimsically and idealistically. Caligula's rebellion pushes logic to its limits in an illogical universe. He realizes just before the end that he has taken a wrong turning and destroyed his own humanness.

There is another kind of reaction to the Absurd, typified by Pinter's Old Times. There is a recognition of the Absurd but there is no rebellion against it, instead there is a kind of bewildered acceptance. At the end of the play we have almost the same situation as at the beginning with the exception of that one large discovery. The same is true of Edward Albee's Everything in the Garden. Jenny says, toward the middle of the play, "Darling, it's going to make such a tremendous difference."²³ But by the end, prostitution and murder have produced no response beyond

²² For a complete discussion of the Rebel against the Absurd see Problematic Rebel.

²³ Edward Albee, Everything in the Garden (New York: Pocket Books, 1969).

the first small anger of recognition. It is as though the human beings on stage were equally immune to the human and the nonhuman. The characters in this type of on-stage recognition play need not be too complicated since a conclusion is usually forced on the audience.

An implied recognition of the Absurd exists in much of comedy, particularly in that type of very witty comedy which imposes its own structure on a formless world. The recognition of the nonhuman and the reaction to it are placed on stage at the same time. In this sense misery is seen "... as the basis of comedy and gaiety as an ever-recurring transcendence ... comedy, like tragedy, is a way of trying to cope with despair, mental suffering, guilt and anxiety."²⁴ It is at once an escape from the world and a denial that the world has any significance. It testifies to the terrible power of the Absurd--to force this kind of response--and to the great strength of human beings who are able to maintain a private and joyous alternative universe for however brief a time.

Both Noel Coward's Present Laughter and Kaufman and Hart's The Man Who Came to Dinner are plays which have exercised what might be called the Comic Option. Both are plays about creativity--the ultimate demonstration of humanness. Creativity is, however, a bit ridiculous in these plays. Even in the careful orderliness of high comedy we are exposed to a tremendous amount of disorder--disorder that sometimes approaches chaos. In Kaufman and Hart's Sheridan Whiteside we have a man who takes and takes and assimilates in a cold, almost nonhuman way, and this is

²⁴Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 301.

the method of his creation. The Absurd has become so much a part of the world of the play that it permeates even the efforts to escape from it. Noel Coward's *Garry Essendine* is more successful. If one disregards the whimsical weaknesses, almost every human on stage is bound to every other human in a healthy if unorthodox manner. Garry and company have a reciprocal relationship--a fact that emerges from the constant argument concerning who benefits most. This combination of recognition and response, particularly in Present Laughter is also a form of rebellion against the Absurd--it denies the importance of the Absurd in denying the importance of the universe. It is, however, a weaker rebellion than those already discussed since neither the characters nor the playwright are able to deny the feeling of lostness directly. It indicates that the Absurd is now so much a part of the world that to deny one is to deny the other.

The next stage of character recognition demonstrates in the most forceful manner the difficulty of attaching a standard definition to the concept "Absurd." In describing the Absurd the word "nonhuman" is used and the feeling involved is a feeling of universal indifference toward anything human. But the next stage of character recognition is a recognition of self. A character on stage realizes the presence of the Absurd and his own responsibility for it. Alberta Feynman says of the characters of the dramatists of the Absurd, "'character' is in itself an incongruity here because these plays are largely peopled by creatures of doubtful human quantity."²⁵ Although there are elements of truth in this generalization, in the recognition of guilt the dramatist must create a

²⁵ Alberta E. Feynman, "The Fetal Quality of 'Character' in Plays of the Absurd," Modern Drama, 9 (1966-67), 18.

three dimensional human being capable of development and drastic change. While human responsibility for the nonhuman suggests that man, himself, is now a part of the Absurd, the acceptance of guilt for and the denial of the nonhuman is possibly the strongest position to this point of development. It indicates that man is beginning to find an order of his own in the disorder of the universe.

Bill Maitland in John Osborne's Inadmissable Evidence has managed to recognize the Absurd and to accept his own guilt. He is on trial in his own dreams. He has known of his guilt and has expected the trial for a long time. We see his life becoming indistinguishable from the lives of his clients. We also see his wife, his various mistresses and his business associates paying less and less attention to him. It is a progression of exile; he is forced to move further and further away from humanness until finally he is all alone. It is Maitland's simultaneous recognition of the Absurd and his own guilt for it which renders him unable to fight back. The struggle is internalized and he is unwilling to halt his own self-destruction. With Inadmissable Evidence Osborne has demonstrated the first half of the recognition of guilt. However, as long as it remains incomplete it is a "wrong turning" very much like Caligula's "wrong turning." It destroys humanness and ends in death.

The completed process of the recognition of guilt is to be found in the work of Ugo Betti, particularly in his play, The Burnt Flower-Bed. Although Betti professes a relatively orthodox Christianity "... the general thrust of the plays, both individually and collectively, leads convincingly to a non-Christian, existentialist, cautiously empirical position ... which accepts no standards as absolute ... but gives to man

the right and the compulsion to explore ... the facts of his experience ..."²⁶ In The Burnt Flower Bed this exploration is made by the charismatic political leader Giovanni. The result is his recognition of the Absurd and the realization that he, Giovanni, shares the responsibility for it. He gave the orders which eventually resulted in unwilling political martyrs, he chose the life which left him responsible for the death of his son. Harold Watts uses the term "shame" to describe the recognition of guilt, "... 'shame' can find its justification only in an acknowledgment that one has created--in part or in its entirety--the plight one endures."²⁷ It is this active process in which Giovanni is engaged. He becomes aware of the Absurd, aware of it as being inside himself--even aware of it as being part of himself. In Betti this realization of guilt tends to make the nonhuman understandable to an individual human being. It makes a choice between the human and the Absurd possible. Giovanni is to stand his human ground in the face of full knowledge of the Absurd. This is a strong human position, established not with benign outside help but against active opposition. Betti's recognition of guilt has become a dialogue of guilt.

V. Dialogue

In To Deny Our Nothingness and Problematic Rebel Maurice Friedman discusses a way of arriving at the position of Dialogue with the Absurd which is very different from that taken by Ugo Betti. Out and out rebellion is the beginning--the rebellion of an Ahab or a Caligula. But

²⁶Eric Salmon, "Ugo Betti's Troubled Waters," Modern Drama, 11 (1968), 101-102.

²⁷Harold H. Watts, "Ugo Betti: The Theatre of 'Shame,'" Modern Drama 12 (1969), 64-79.

the rebel moves away from the total negation of his rebellion; he finds a positive value in humanness and stands his ground in the presence of the Absurd. The result is Dialogue. "This dialogue means an open-minded and courageous standing one's ground before the absurdity of a world one cannot image, of an otherness that one cannot grasp--not even in the meeting with one's fellowman--and of the self within that one cannot fathom."²⁸

Such a position can only be taken in a world where recognition has already occurred--a world where maintaining humanness in the face of the nonhuman is a daily tension. As a result the drama which contains Dialogue with the Absurd tends to be not Theater of the Absurd and not Absurd Drama but drama which contains Absurd elements. At this point the nonhuman has become simply a part of the universe which the playwright may use in constructing his plays. It has become an underlying force, an "other" with which modern man contends.

Robert Bolt's Vivat! Vivat Regina! is a retelling of the Elizabeth-Mary Queen of Scots story with Elizabeth as the vital character. Elizabeth is locked into a structure as Queen of England and each day brings additional evidence that the structure is a thin covering for chaos, that the court's rhetoric of humanness has very little to do with the reality of power. It is Elizabeth's task (a task similar to that of Thomas More in Bolt's A Man for All Seasons) to find the narrow field of action that satisfies both duty as Queen and duty as human being. It is a Dialogue with the Absurd from which there is no escape--barring death or surrender. The struggle is made dramatically visible by Mary. Humanness demands her

²⁸Friedman, To Deny Our Nothingness, p. 354.

life, the "structure" of power requires her death. In Bolt's version Mary dictates her own death and Elizabeth maintains humanness in the very center of the Absurd. In some ways it is a dry humanness, a hoarded humanness but it is human and it is a response to the nonhuman of inspired complexity and heroic proportion. It is man reestablished.

Becket by Jean Anouilh is, in many ways, a variation on the same theme. In defending the "Honor of Man" Becket finds meaning. Amidst the chaos of Henry II's England Becket maintains a structure. The structure appears to be the church and the meaning to be God but Becket (and Anouilh) are using other names for the reality of humanness in the world of the Absurd. Becket's life is initially more open and less dry than that of Elizabeth but he finds himself driven to a position where the choice is to cease to be human or to die. He realizes that to cease to be human is quite literally to cease to be--that it is far more final than death--death is not as thorough an obliteration of identity. One of the last things Becket says is, "Lucky little Saxon! This black world will have been in order to the end, for you."²⁹ Faced with the Absurd he makes a rather wry death an affirmation of human life.

Dialogue with the Absurd has produced the most complete response to the nonhuman. It has also, of necessity, created the most complex characters. The contribution of Dialogue has been to offer a human response to the nonhuman constructed in the presence of the nonhuman and carefully maintained in daily life.

²⁹ Jean Anouilh, Becket, (New York: Coward McCann, Inc., 1960), p. 124.

VI. Acceptance

There still remains one other response to the Absurd--acceptance. It is as though recognition had taken place long before the opening of the play or as if the Absurd had always been part of the world and there was no need for surprise or even for response. The existence of this attitude is made plain by plays of dialogue. They cannot be completely understood unless the audience has come to accept the nonhuman as a permanent part of the human world. Beyond plays of Dialogue there are works, described as Theatre of the Absurd or Comedy of the Absurd which exist in a world where no rational order has ever been possible and where recognition of the Absurd is as natural a process as the recognition of air.

In Theatre of the Absurd the works of Samuel Beckett present excellent examples of acceptance. Beckett's Waiting for Godot is in many ways an extended metaphor of that response to the nonhuman. Estragon and Vladimir have always been as they now are. For all practical purposes, they have always been where they now are and what they do is the ultimate act of acceptance, they have found the ultimate way of being passive in the nonhuman world. They wait. All of their lives are composed of waiting from the beginning to the almost instantaneous end. They will not stop waiting, they will only stop. The world Vladimir and Estragon inhabit is almost bare. Forms are distorted, relationships of all kinds are incomplete and changeable, and the devices of low comedy are the only means of communication. The characters themselves are incomplete, only partly human. They might well be described as "creatures of doubtful human quantity." It is this universe which

Beckett inhabits, this universe which his acceptance indicates as the only universe, past, present or future.

The result of this kind of acceptance can be seen in *Endgame*. This *Endgame* is the end of all life in the world. Again there are two men, Hamm and Clov, and again the world is almost bare. Only this time the audience is aware that the final deaths in the long process of dying are about to occur--will occur not too long after the curtain falls. Beckett's set monodramatically suggests that this same morality play of death occurs inside the heads of all human beings in this world of the Absurd. The acceptance of the Absurd has been, in Beckett's case, the acceptance of death.

Beckett's death theme has been used in another play of acceptance, Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. The play is Comedy of the Absurd and as such it makes use of the devices of Theatre of the Absurd and of the Comic Option. In the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Even though they move about on stage for three acts and we do not see them die, we know from the very beginning that they are dead. There is a structure in this stage world but they do not understand it. There are human identities but no one is sure which is Rosencrantz and which is Guildenstern--nor would it make any difference. During Shakespeare's greatest tragedy Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are involved in a vaudeville cross talk act. They become an extended metaphor for man in the Absurd world--he has no identity, no understanding, no structure to his existence and no certainty except disintegration followed by death. The world of Stoppard and the world of Beckett are essentially the same. In the works of both acceptance of the Absurd and the death of humanness have occurred before the plays begin.

In N. F. Simpson's One Way Pendulum life goes on but one wonders if it can be called human life. It is as though acceptance of the Absurd had shattered life and humanness into their component parts and those parts had entered into the inanimate world. Kirby Groomkirby spends his time teaching Speak-Your-Weight machines to sing the Hallelujah Chorus. His success is hindered by "Brother Gormless" one of the machines with sufficient free will to refuse to co-operate. Kirby's father, Arthur, is assembling an extremely large model of the Old Bailey which, when assembled is capable of meting out justice. In this world the Absurd is not so much accepted as ignored. We have a vision of human beings ceasing to be human but continuing to exist and continuing to move farther and farther away from humanness. In Simpson's work the way is different but the bleak destination is the same.

Joe Orton's play What the Butler Saw is the final example of Acceptance and in an odd way it is the most hopeful. Unlike most plays of acceptance which begin the process of disintegration at the beginning of the work and complete it by the end, What the Butler Saw builds to a logical and very structured conclusion. The overall plot is an adaptation of a device used by the Greek, Menander and by his Roman disciple, Terence, and also by Plautus. The device in question is a sexual attack on a woman sometime before her marriage by an unknown assailant who later turns out to be her husband. The structure of Orton's play relies heavily on such Roman devices (as mentioned earlier Roman comedy had elements of the Absurd). What the Butler Saw takes place in a Mental Hospital and involves identity changes on a grand scale, numerous sexual deviations--including inadvertant incest--and leaves the characters

battered and not unbloody. However, there is something that looks like hope in the final stage direction, "They pick up their clothes and weary, bleeding, drugged and drunk, climb the rope ladder into the blazing light."³⁰ Making allowances for the theatrical value of such a tongue-in-cheek conclusion, there is still something more than pessimism here. If What the Butler Saw functions as a metaphor for the world of the Absurd, there is the suggestion that human beings will not only survive in it but emerge from it. Orton's structure which provides explanations for the characters at the end also suggests that not all order is beyond the comprehension of human beings. The underlying assumption of this play of acceptance may well be that the human and the nonhuman are not mutually exclusive and that the combination does not necessarily result in the destruction of the human.

VII. Conclusion

From the coming of the Absurd to its acceptance there has been no sign of moving back. Like the title of N. F. Simpson's play it is a one way pendulum--there has been no return swing. There has been development, a gradual progression from startled recognition to various active forms of response to passive acceptance. Of all the responses only the forms of Dialogue have tended to maintain humanness.

Perhaps in the nature of things human beings tend to find an essential, primary value in life. The direction taken by modern drama has been away from explicit presentations of the Absurd and toward work

³⁰ Joe Orton, What the Butler Saw (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969), p. 89.

like that of Robert Bolt where the Absurd is under the surface. The result is a drama of humanness built in a nonhuman world. There is something that almost justifies Joe Orton's "blazing light" in the spectacle of humanness contending with the Absurd and remaining human. Even Comedy of the Absurd which tends to present the bleakest vision, is hopeful as a form since it combines the strength of the Comic Option with a much greater ability to take the world as it is. The theater itself is optimistic by definition--the images on stage are human images and the art (even the dark art of Beckett) is a human art with a human structure.

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