

Metaphysical and Theatrical Absurd in the Plays of Beckett and Camus

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Abstract

Metaphysical anguish has been a common theme of philosophical and dramatic writing in the twentieth century. It has been a major feature of the Theatre of Ideas of Anouilh, Sartre and Camus besides also being the theme of the avant-garde playwrights. Man in relation to the universe is their focus unlike the social and psychological being of realistic and naturalistic drama. Race, moment and milieu of naturalistic drama have been replaced by the absurd human situation. A bourgeois life and ideals are replaced by the perception of absurdity in the characters. There is no fixed human character and “man is an existent in a situation”(Leonard Pronko,19). It is with the avant-garde playwrights such as Samuel Beckett that the artistic rebellion against naturalism becomes complete when besides the content, form also changes radically. The ideas in Albert Camus' plays are revolutionary but both plot and action become more avant-garde in the fifties with Beckett's plays. Therefore, while Camus' plays restrict themselves to metaphysical rebellion, Beckett goes a step further and embraces the artistic rebellion or what James McFarlane calls the “aesthetics of silence”(McFarlane,507). This study explores the continuities and discontinuities of metaphysical and theatrical revolt in the two playwrights.

Keywords: *Absurd, avant-garde, metaphysical, theatrical revolt, ennui*

Introduction

Albert Camus was primarily a philosopher who wrote two major tracts *The Myth of Sisyphus*(1943) and *The Rebel*(1951) which are meditations on the world's absurdity. The dialectic between hope and despair; rebellion and endurance are the theoretical basis from which his plays derive the idea of absurdity. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* through the classical legend of the rebel Sisyphus, Camus presents the absurd predicament of humanity. In his analysis of the human situation Camus came to a conclusion which he put forth as follows:

In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights man feels an, a stranger. His exile is with, since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and life, the actor and his setting is properly the feeling of absurdity. (The Myth of Sisyphus,6)

The only truth and eventuality of human life is death. If this is true, “what freedom can exist in the fullest sense without the assurance of eternity?” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*,57). This is the exposition of the philosopher playwrights as well as of the absurd dramatists. Given the absurd world, what then is the solution? Revolt or submission, hope or despair. This is the dilemma of both Camus and Beckett which is treated differently in their plays.

Camus' Theatre of Ideas

For Camus metaphysical rebellion is a solution for facing absurdity and in *The Rebel* he clearly states his stand. This metaphysical rebellion is according to him” the justified claim of a desire for unity against the incompleteness of human life, expressed by death and its dispersion expressed by evil (*The Rebel*,30). According to him, the rebel revolts against the power which holds his life in its hands and he does this through blasphemy. Like Sartre he advises man not to give in to “bad faith” but to experience the “nausea” of absurdity (*The Absurd*,29-40). But despite this Camus' world is relieved by relative hope. Rebellion cannot take place unless man has faith in humanity and himself along with the urge for a better order. *The Myth of Sisyphus* suggests this hope and in his final statement Camus suggests that man can live despite experiencing absurdity and in that lies his revolt. He states that despite the travails of life “one must imagine Sisyphus happy (*The Myth of Sisyphus*,121).

In keeping with his philosophy, Camus' dramatic characters are all rebels trying to transcend the situation in which they have been placed in order to defy absurdity. In *Caligula* (1938), the historical Roman emperor of the first century A.D. is transformed into a metaphysical rebel. Caligula decides to rebel against the Gods and their arbitrary management of human affairs. The recognition of the absurd dawns upon him after the death of his sister Drusilla with whom he has had an incestuous relationship. He realises at that moment the ephemerality of human life and mutability of human happiness and as he puts it, he had realised that, “Men die and they are not happy” (*Caligula*,10). Caligula's dialogues reveal the same logic that is evident in the dialectics of Camus' philosophical works.

Caligula realises that till now he had been surrounded by “lies and deceptions”, and now desires to realise this and live by the light of truth (*Caligula*,41). He adopts policies such as the confiscation of patrician property, execution of patricians, closing of granaries etc. in order to imitate God's arbitrary treatment of mankind. Cherea who comes closest to Camus' philosophy (of revolting against the world while living in it) revolts against Caligula's atrocities proclaiming that: “What I want is to live and to be happy. Neither to my mind is possible if one pushes the absurd to its logical conclusions” (*Caligula*,47). And Helicon too points out that some men despite the realisation of absurdity or due to their ignorance are still enjoying their meals.

Caligula's metaphysical rebellion has therefore become a tyrant's rebellion. Such nihilistic rebellion which Camus believed had become a part of latter-day Marxism (under Lenin), he had condemned in *The Rebel*. Camus' belief is that if one wishes to revolt one cannot be selfish. In *The Rebel* he states clearly that:

In absurdist experience suffering is individual. But from the moment that a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience- as the experience of everyone...I rebel, therefore we exist. (The Rebel,28)

Caligula's revolt is therefore unjust. In an attempt to overcome absurdity, he has become the tyrant God. The humanist in Camus could not altogether deny hope to humanity and finally Caligula is killed by the judges. Camus issued his censure of Caligula's act in the programme note for the 1945 performance, saying that "if Caligula is right to deny the existence of Gods, he is wrong to deny the importance of man"(Albert Camus,74). This play thus dramatizes the belief Camus set out to state in his philosophical works that one must find means of transcending absurdity by revolting against it while living in that world.

Absurdity is the common ground where the Theatre of Ideas the Theatre of Absurd converge. But as is evident through the example of *Caligula* there are major differences between the two. Camus' plays are logically constructed and are different from Beckett's plays in their representational technique. *Caligula* reveals conformity to the classical form of drama and follows the Aristotelian formula in having a beginning, middle and end. Camus' technique remains similar to the naturalistic theatre unlike the Absurd plays of in which we see discontinuity with not only the naturalistic vision of man but also with the naturalistic techniques of drama. The theatre with him remains conventional. In an attempt to fuse philosophy with theatre the play suffers from abstraction which has been pointed out as a major drawback of Camus by critics like Freeman and Sonnenfeld. In his drama the absurd is presented in its dialectical rather than theatrical form.

This is true of *The Just*(1949) also which is a play presented in the classical form of five acts and is based on the terrorist activities of a group in Moscow of 1906. Here Camus dramatizes political rebellion rather than philosophical rebellion, but it shares with the spirit *Caligula* the cause of the fight against despotism. The play reaffirms Camus' faith in humanity. He contrasts in this play the ideal rebel Kaliyev with the cynical rebel Stepan. Kaliyev is given the task of bombing the carriage of Grand Duke Sergei in this play. In his first attempt he fails to do so on seeing children in the carriage because he believes in the positive values of "love, beauty and happiness" and he refuses to harm the innocent (*The Just*,131). In the second attempt he successfully bombs the carriage and is sentenced to death. He refuses to seek the pardon that is offered to him and thereby elevates himself to the status of a true rebel. A "just" rebel, as *The Rebel* states is one who is ready to sacrifice his life for the life he takes and his happiness lies in the happiness of humanity. There is a redeeming characteristic in the rebel as we discover Kaliyev's love for Dora.

This play which shows rebellion against the totalitarian state retains the form of realistic drama. The bombings take place off stage as is required by the Aristotelian formula and the play suffers from the handicap of being abstract. It is through the exchange of dialogues that issues like revolt and faith are discussed. However, the play *Cross Purpose* (1944) dramatizes the most sensationally nihilistic revolt against the absurd yet fails due to its abstract and dialectical nature. This play is negative and defeatist in nature like Beckett's plays. Though there is philosophical melodrama here, the play stops short of attaining the theatrical success of a Beckett play. In this play though Camus has reduced setting, action and characterization to the minimum, the revolt against suffering still remains dialectical. However, despite this difference, there are certain similarities to a Beckett play. Martha and her mother like Beckett's characters are confined to the same activities. Drugging and drowning the rich clients who come to their inn has deadened them to feeling and compassion.

When Jan, the son who has been away for twenty years returns home, she fails to recognise him and the son is unable to say simply that "It's me" (*Cross Purpose*, 77). As the title of the play has often been translated as *The Misunderstanding* suggests, the mother and daughter kill Jan not knowing that he is their loved one who has been longing to make them happy. In an absurd world the most hopeful of actions is at cross-purposes with fulfilment. Therefore the Sun that Martha longs for becomes symbolic of the God of the absurd world who kills all human hope. Jan's failure to simply say "It's me" becomes symbolic of the breakdown of communication between men which in Beckett's plays penetrates even the aesthetics of the play. Though Camus' plays become more and more symbolic, it is Beckett who most effectively formulated the language of the absurd.

Beckett's Theatre of Absurd

In Beckett's plays the Absurd is presented on stage through theatrical technique and form without arguing about it. In his plays the statement of absurdity manifests itself through dramaturgical changes.. Instead of the dialectical presentation of absurdity that Camus undertakes by lending his philosophy of the Absurd to his characters, Beckett presents his revolt in terms of dramaturgical presentation. In Beckett the realistic stage of Camus is abandoned and his revolt against absurdity is conveyed through the stage image which does not pretend to mirror reality.

This anti-formalism with Beckett has acquired a new form. In an interview with Tom Driver in 1961, Beckett had said about the vocation of the dramatist that "to find a form that accommodates the mess is the task of the artist now" (*Graver & Federman*, 219). The "mess" is Beckett's absurd that sums up the senselessness of life in a post-holocaust world where man is alienated in a universe devoid of all meaning. Beckett's plays reveal a change in structure. As Leonard Pronko has pointed out, the categories of exposition or introduction of the theme, rising action, climax and conclusion are not followed in his plays in a strict sense. Unlike Camus, Beckett dramatizes the idea of the absurd through theatrical revolt. No act divisions separate the action in most of his plays for action is circularity and stasis in his theatre. Character too is not well defined but merely suggested. The stage- props are reduced to a minimum to show the

destitution of props of hope and happiness in actual life. Silences and acts of cruelty abound in his theatre. Like Artaud, Beckett believes that “it is through the skin” that “metaphysics” should penetrate the mind (*Pronko*,26).

Unlike Camus who retains hope in humanity (in plays like *Caligula* and *The Just*), Beckett shows a drama of submission, of men who actually live with the Absurd though all hope has deserted them. His plays come very close to his own description of Tal Coat's paintings:

The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express (Esslin,17).

The plays of Beckett written after *Waiting for Godot* become more and more absurd in form as well so that one cannot be distinguished from the other. They submit to absurdity and accept it which is not the case with Camus’ works. A study of Beckett's *Endgame*(1957), *All that Fall*(1957), *Act Without Words I*(1957), *Act Without Words II*(1959) and *Krapp's Last Tape*(1959) will show how Beckett successfully incorporates the theatrical and metaphysical absurd.

Life for the Beckettian characters is a “futile merry-go- round”(*Gaskell*,147). Everyday reveals the same routine activities. Therefore, the concatenation of events and motives is irrelevant here. In *Endgame*, Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell, all reveal their unhappiness at the monotony of their life of repetitive activities. However nothing can stop the ennui of such a meaningless life. After a round of those repetitive activities Hamm remarks: “ This is not much fun...But that’s always the way at the end of the day, isn’t it Clov?(*Endgame*,17). Therefore life becomes a farce which is enacted daily. The characters of this play are all common people unlike the uncommon and exceptional characters of Camus. This is done deliberately to show the universality of suffering in an absurd world. The sets of the play are sparse and humble unlike most of Camus’ plays. Hamm sits on a chair rolled on castors in his shabby coat while his parents Nagg and Nell inhabit dustbins. The scene outside also shows the earth and sea in their barrenness. The whole set symbolises the barrenness, stagnation and ennui that daily invades life in an absurd universe. For Hamm, time is an endless cycle measured by the pain-killers he keeps asking for from time to time. Generation after generation suffering is the only heritage that each individual hands over to the other. The only lateral movement is the movement towards the imminent death of Nagg, Nell and Hamm. Dialogue which theatre uses as a vocal medium to convey ideas is reduced to stichomythic exchanges which are part of the games characters play in order to kill ennui. All the characters are nearing death and whether Clov will be able to transcend death is doubtful. It is the close of a game of chess- an endgame, where every move is futile.

All That Fall, a radio play performed for the BBC in 1957, unlike *Endgame* retains a realistic world. The play is rich in scenic detail and therefore different from several other plays of Beckett. The situation presents Mrs. Rooney going by a dusty country road to receive her husband who is coming home from business by the 12:30 mail. In order to stress the suffering

that men undergo in an absurd world, Beckett shows all his characters in great pain. Mrs Rooney suffers from obesity, kidney trouble and body-ache whereas Mr. Rooney is a senile, blind man. All other characters too are unhappy- Mr. Tyler is now “grandchildless Miss. Fitt has an ailing mother, Mr. Slocum too perhaps is ill (*All That Fall*,14). The predicament of a post- lapsarian is presented here- everyone is suffering from pain and inertia. And despite partial communication with each other the characters feel lonely. This breakdown of communication suggests that there is a breakdown of relationships also. The characters feel they are using a dead language. The title of the play is derived from the theme of the next day's sermon in church: “The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down.”(*All That Fall*,34). The wild laughter of Mr. and Mrs. Rooney after she utters the title indicates the irony of it.

After this play which shows at least some action and use of dialogue, drama with Beckett becomes a scene of stasis and silence indicating his cynicism about the world and its absurdity. The mimes of *Act Without Words I*(1957), *Act Without Words II*(1959) alongwith *Krapp's Last Tape*(1959) illustrate this. *Act Without Words I* is a pantomime played by a man in the desert surrounded by a prop less stage where from time to time, from the flies are suspended such objects such as a tree, a carafe of water, a pair of ropes and cubes. The pantomime emphasizes through the dumb-show the inertia of human life and man's helplessness in a universe ruled by an arbitrary God who at times provides him with water but will not let him drink it despite providing him with the cubes and the rope to reach it. One locale is so much like another in an absurd world that time and place do not matter. After the man has been given a number of false hopes and is thoroughly tantalized, he fingers his throat, suggesting that he contemplates suicide. Camus' Sisyphus too contemplates the same after realising the monotony and futility of life. Here despite the same realisation , the man is deprived of even the means of committing suicide. The tragic in Beckett's plays is more powerful and what Camus describes as the feeling of absurdity becomes a literal fact. The mime presents the actor and the deus-ex machina(symbolised by the whistle and the flies) at cross- purposes. To be unable to commit suicide is the climax of man's destitution and the absurdity of the universe. This is something that Camus does not intend to present as he is more of a humanist and less sceptical than Beckett.

Act Without Words II, which is a mime for two players reiterates the theme of man's helplessness and futility of human life. Sack A and B, each contain a man whom the goad pricks to come out. A who is presumably ill (he takes pills and cannot enjoy the carrot) and B who is sophisticated and active (looks at his watch, consults a map and compass) are both bound to the ennui and repetition of an absurd life. The only change that takes place is that the goads now come on two wheels. There is a suggestion that humanity's plight remains the same despite technical advancement. Only the magnitude of torture which the arbitrary God (symbolized by the goads) applies changes.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, the solitude and ennui of absurd existence comes through to us in this monody where the past Krapp (at 39) comes alive on stage through the recorded tape to bring alive the present debauchee at 69. The opening stage direction tells us that the action takes place

in the “future”(*Krapp's Last Tape*,55). This is done to suggest that the past, present and future Krapp remain the same. Krapp's life has been an endless sequence of drinking bouts, sexual longings and gorging himself with bananas. He has been reduced to a beast, though his mental calibre should be that of a writer (which he has been in the past). The tape recalls the past moments when he realised the futility of life. The only moments he can rejoice in are moments when he says “spool”. This can be seen as symbolic of the fact that the spool-like existence is all he can have. It has length but no meaning. The past, present and future are identical, much like the silence in which the tape runs on in the end. Thus we see how Beckett presents the aesthetics of silence through his plays.

Conclusion

The stoic bearing with absurdity that is accompanied by revolt in the form of dark humour and the sallies of the characters in Beckett seems more effectively blasphemous than any of Caligula's or Martha's abstract revolts. The metaphysical revolt against the universe and its creator comes through more vocally in the silence of the sufferers and through the propleless stage. The allusive plays of Beckett are therefore better vehicles of the absurd than Camus' drama of statement.

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