

The Edge of Impossibility

suffer . . . ,” and the old doctor sits by “amiably,” undisturbed by the death of Tuzenbach and singing “Ta-ra boom-de-ay, sit on the curb I may”; the last impression of this extraordinary play is one of frozen dialectic, intelligence deceiving itself with words and balanced by a mindlessness that uses words quite aptly to express its curb-sitting or moral paralysis, an image for the sisters as well as the doctor. Indeed, it is their idealism, their failure to make concrete and therefore active the words they use so charmingly, that has ruined their “real” lives. Natasha, who cannot talk well at all and whose French is embarrassingly poor, is significantly victorious over the sisters. Other symptoms of disintegration reflected in language are the change from the love duets of the second act (Masha and Vershinin; Irina and Tuzenbach) to the monologues of the last acts (the doctor’s soliloquy on his ruined life; Andrei’s in the presence of a deaf man); the interruptions, aimless talk, and the jokes of Solyony’s that always miss their mark; the *non sequiturs* that are at once amusing and unsettling, suggesting as they do a serious failure of sane communication. Chekhov’s plays are tragedies of language, like Ionesco’s, assaults against the conventional language, which disguises by its very conventionality the hollowness of those who use it.

Most interesting of all the similarities between the Chekhovian and the *avant-garde* theater is the use of the “arbitrary issue” as poetic image. In absurdist theater the arbitrary issue is that which, despite its apparent inadequacy, is to carry the burden of the character’s obsession. In Adamov’s *Le Ping-Pong*, it is a pinball machine that captivates the imaginations of two men who grow old playing it, wasting their lives, transforming their natural

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human impulses toward transcendence into nonsensical trivialities about the machine itself. As Esslin notes in his excellent study of the play, the work is a powerful image of the “alienation of man through the worship of a false objective”⁵—the machine itself an obvious metaphor for anything that captivates men’s lives without being worth the sacrifice. In Ionesco as well the arbitrary issue is that which is “given” without explanation: one must find out whether Mallot spelled his name with a “t” or a “d,” one must get the growing corpse out of the apartment, one must resist to the end the metamorphosis into a rhinoceros. The images are not significant in themselves (except as theater), but only in what they suggest. This conception of writing differs from, for instance, the very real and not at all arbitrary issues of Ibsen, attacking the hypocrisy of society in *Ghosts*, or of Strindberg, passionately attacking the vampirish female. As if the world no longer offered real issues, these several playwrights create grotesque and parodying issues that will dominate their characters’ imaginations and, when the play is successful, the audience’s imagination as well. Such theater is really poetry, as Kafka’s works are poetry: the creation of a sustained image that is the vehicle for symbolic meaning, yet never glibly contained by this meaning. But because the image is necessarily private and not social, historical, or mythical, the meaning must be expanded by the audience, which as a kind of unified consciousness can no longer be content to know—as Picasso says of most people—only what they already know. The difficulty with absurdist theater is its deliberate refusal to tell us what we already know, its unheroic heroes and unvillainous villains, its mock plots, its insistence upon

baffling expectation, its taking over the prat-falls and rapid dialogue of vaudeville entertainment while leaving behind the "honest" foolishness. But as poetry, its images are closer to Pound's definition of the image than are, perhaps, such readily acceptable images as the paper lantern in Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the doomed bird in *Miss Julie*. In 1913 Pound defined the "image" as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. . . . It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art." ⁶ The Imagists themselves created no images that broke so completely from the conventionally "poetic" as did the dramatists of the absurd.

In traditional theater the central issue is always acted upon; this is the only means of plot. One finally kills the king, though at great expense; one manages to marry the inevitable person; one breaks free from husband, children, and hypocritical society. Generally, in Chekhov and the absurd dramatists, the central issue is either not understood or not acted upon or both. The cherry orchard has all the makings of a symbol except—unlike the stuffed seagull in the earlier play—its symbolism points in several directions. It is various things to various people, and yet in itself it does not exist; it has no meaning. Never does anyone see the cherry orchard for what it is; they see wasted opportunities for making money, or they see ghostly faces in it, whether the student Trofimov's vision of the faces of serfs or Madame Ranevskaya's vision of her dead mother walking in it. They are capable

of seeing only what they bring to it, of seeing only themselves. And when the orchard is finally sold, when the catastrophe happens, there is a queerly inappropriate relief; Gayev, though totally displaced by the change, says cheerfully:

"Yes, indeed, everything is all right now. Before the cherry orchard was sold we were all worried and miserable, but afterward, when the question was finally settled once and for all, everybody calmed down and felt quite cheerful."

One is reminded of Mann's famous definition of irony in his essay, "Goethe and Tolstoy": a technique that glances at both sides, playing "slyly and irresponsibly among opposites." With such irony there is no possibility of sentimental excess, since the writer does not choose sides.

If this is so, the theatergoer wants to ask, then what is the play about? Why has it been written? That the apparent central issue of a work should be declared quite trivial and insignificant after all the words and tears exerted for it is an extraordinary event in literature. It is as if the conventional form of art were calling itself into question, calling its very reason for existence into question, or calling, at least, the conventional audience's expectations into question. If it is ever appropriate to talk of genres in close relationship to actual works of art, one might say that for the tragic vision, deadly seriousness must always surround this central issue, and what the play undertakes is of real concern not only within the context of the play, but symbolically for its audience. Tragedy is a sacred art form. When self-consciousness or

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doubt or an impulse toward self-parody enter, tragedy disintegrates. In Chekhov this is precisely the case.

As in Beckett, the less tangible the means of salvation, the greater the urgency for salvation becomes. The intelligent human beings of such drama, caught in the purgatorial present, can only *talk*; it is the stupid—Natasha, Solyony, Arkadina, the professor of *Uncle Vanya*—who live on some level of existence, forcing others to submit to their wills, the simple fact of their being able to live involving a death for others. As one element gains strength, so another element loses strength. The ghostliness of the central issue or image in Chekhov gives way abruptly to the flagrant mystery of the central issue of a play like *Godot*. Godot as image approaches the unfathomable just as Melville's white whale does—the former by its very absence, the latter by its tremendously detailed presence. Chekhov's imagery is more conventional than that of the absurdists, of course, since he is committed to a naturalistic stage, but his use of the image is similar: the truly poetic image whose meaning, as Pound says, gives one a sense of liberation and sudden growth by refusing to confine itself—in other words, to the easily explicable.

If there is intellectual debate in the theater of the absurd it is, like the "intellectual" discussions in Chekhov, ironic, exaggerated, and foolish, coming as it does at the point in history at which philosophy is divorced from the transcendental values it once tried to discover or support. Hence debate, talk, and duets of dialogue become meaningless, and characters are their own chorus, speaking and commenting endlessly upon their own speech. Are there images behind this speech? Are there realities behind these images? The prevailing tone in existential literature

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is that of mystery. In this art a strange, dissipated action, or the memory or vague desire for action, has replaced the older, more vital, ritualistic concerns of the stage. Chekhov and the absurdists remain true to their subject—life—by refusing to reduce their art to a single emotion and idea.