

Albee and the Absurd Drama

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This paper attempts to use *The Zoo Story*<sup>1</sup> as a way of evaluating Edward Albee's degree of commitment to the Theatre of the Absurd. This aim might not appear very novel as Martin Esslin has already included Albee in his list of well known absurdists. However, regardless of how famous Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*<sup>2</sup> it has never curtailed the critical Babel surrounding absurdist drama, for the term 'absurdism', despite Esslin, has been used in many different ways. C.W. Bigsby<sup>3</sup>, for instance, by developing a predominantly thematic approach to the subject, and to Albee in particular, has charged Esslin with a lack of rigour for having included *The Zoo Story* amongst the absurdist plays. His disagreement with Esslin stems from his view of Absurd Drama as a revelation of nihilistic viewpoints. Thus, he maintains that in *The Zoo Story*, Albee, unlike the absurdists, is formulating an affirmation of man's ability to face reality.

The implication of Bigsby's two assertions regarding Albee's *The Zoo Story* will be fully investigated here. It will be shown that although Albee's positive thinking is indeed important for the understanding of the play, it does not necessarily exclude *The Zoo Story* from the ambit of Esslin's definition of absurdism. This is because Esslin has broadly defined absurd subject-matter as man's metaphysical angst and sense of bewilderment in the face of ineffective ideological systems. However, the purpose of this essay is not only to apprehend the playwright's vision of the world. It also purports to show that Bigsby failed to grasp that it is the form in which this sense of bewilderment expresses itself that is the essential aspect of the theatre of the Absurd. In other words, what is said in Absurd Drama is indissolubly linked with the manner in which it is said, and cannot be said in any other way.

Because the content of *The Zoo Story* is successfully a function of its form, it will be labelled an absurdist play. But while trying to evaluate how effectively Albee works out his vision of the world, it becomes apparent that Albee is not a fully committed Absurdist. In his attempt to compel the audience to partake of his vision, Albee refuses to dehumanize his characters, a pre-requisite for absurdism.

## The Theatre of the Absurd

The New form of theatre that Martin Esslin has called Absurd is a form of poetry, a concretized metaphor yielding a presentation of the anguish of a world cut off from a basis of solid logic and religious precepts. It is a poetic theatre in the sense that, like poetry, it is founded on the belief that to state is to destroy and to suggest is to create. It is a form of poetry but not of lyrical poetry for its mood is violent and grotesque. Its language and images do not rely on "a rich web of verbal association"<sup>4</sup>, but on the contrary it tends towards a devaluation of language. It renounces "arguing about the absurdity of human condition, it merely presents it in being, that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence"<sup>5</sup>. These images embody the whole dialectic of the limitation of human knowledge as viewed by the philosopher and are articulated by the Absurdist playwright so as to fulfil the aesthetic ideal of unity between form and subject matter. In other words, if the sense of irrationality of the human condition is to be presented, the form in which it is expressed must be illogical as well. New content demands new form and if the philosopher no longer believes, as Plato did, that a human being is endowed with a core of immutable essence, the characters in a drama must not be wholly consistent. Similarly, the assumption that logical discourse as a possible means of conveying trustworthy solutions is invalid cancels out the need for the well constructed plot of the well-made play in its regular movement from introduction and exposition to climax and dénouement. Generally speaking, if the Absurdist writer rejects what he considers philosophical fallacies, it implies that he must also reject the aesthetic principles that support them. To express the various "isms" of the modern world under the tyranny of traditional theatrical conventions is to share with Camus and Sartre the blame for a contradiction the Absurdist writer urges us to avoid.

It is this striving for the achievement of harmony between the new forms suitable to their subject matter that made the Absurdist base themselves mainly, though not essentially, on the revolutionary techniques of Artaud and the French avant-garde movement<sup>6</sup>. The theatre of the Absurd should not be understood as a 'school.' As Esslin says:

"It is a basic mistake to assume that all the works that somehow come under this label are the same or even very similar; and it is nonsense to try to attach

a value judgement to the whole category."<sup>7</sup>

The theatre of the Absurd is "intended as a generic concept of a large number of extremely varied and elusive phenomena" concentrating "on certain important elements that make them in other respects, quite different from one another."<sup>8</sup>

The theatre of the Absurd cannot be defined in ideological terms and the fact that it mainly portrays a sense of bewilderment at the lack of any ideological system does not necessarily mean it embodies a nihilistic viewpoint. What is far more important to the concept of the theatre of the Absurd is the form in which this sense of bewilderment and mystery expresses itself: the devaluation or even downright dissolution of language, the disintegration of plot, characterization and final solution, (which had hitherto been the hallmark of drama) and the substitution of new elements of form - concrete stage imagery, repetition or intensification. In sum, a whole new stage language<sup>9</sup>.

### The Zoo Story

In their attempt to avoid the aura of well-made drama, the Absurdist favoured the one-act play. Although *The Zoo Story* is in this mould, it has not been chosen here simply because of its compactness. The choice relies, more importantly, on the fact that the play gives an insight into Albee's understanding of the theatre. *The Zoo Story* can be seen to be both metatheatre as well as an instance of the absurd. This is made clear when Albee creates a duality of roles for Jerry. That is, Jerry is at the same time a character and the creator of his own play. He is as much the madman that comes to the park and unreasonably causes his own death as the mad poet, the creator caught in the very act of his creativity, conjuring up the play 'The Zoo Story' which his audience, Peter, is later going to watch on TV. To distinguish one from the other is difficult, for Jerry-character and Jerry-creator overlap in an almost indistinguishable way throughout the play. However there is a moment where Jerry-creator emerges quite distinctively from Jerry-character, which justifies the stress laid on this duality. Jerry, thinking of his visit to the zoo and still wondering about Peter says:

Jerry: I'll start walking around in a little while, and eventually I'll sit down. (Recalling) Wait until you see the expression on *his* face. (italics mine)

Peter: What? Whose face? Look here, is this something about the zoo?<sup>10</sup>

The pronoun 'you' is certainly addressed to the audience, and the adjective 'his' is a reference to Peter, his interlocutor at the time. By doing this, Jerry places himself out of the play and reveals that he deliberately intends to create a 'play' with Peter as his private audience.

Jerry: (Distantly) The what?

Peter: The zoo; the zoo. Something about the zoo.

Jerry: The zoo?

Peter: You've mentioned it several times.

Jerry: (Still distant, but returning abruptly) The zoo? Oh, yes; the zoo. I was there before I come here...<sup>11</sup>

The interpretation of the former quotation is reinforced by Jerry's subsequent absentmindedness as revealed in the latter quotation. He is removed from what is happening on the stage which suggests that his play is not clearly delineated in his mind. From this moment on, Jerry becomes an actor-creator in search of a play. The idea that Albee, either, consciously or not, wanted us to assume Jerry's role as a creator is made more explicit in Peter's words:

"I... I don't express myself too well sometimes (He attempts a joke on himself) I'm in publishing, not writing."

What Peter puts forth as a joke suggests that Jerry, being the one who could express himself so well, should be taken as a writer.

To accept Jerry as a creator has also the further advantage of demonstrating Albee's desire to involve the audience's attention to the extreme. One may also say that what he develops on the stage is a kind of didactic process that brings the audience to an awareness of what modern theatre is. The audience, represented by Peter in *The Zoo Story* is, in an Artaudian way, involved in an atmosphere of hypnotic suggestion in which the mind is affected by direct pressure on the senses. This hypnotic trance into which Jerry puts his audience is revealed by Peter's excitement when listening to the tale of the dog, and his shift of mood from apathy to a crescendo of madness. This shift of mood has the final merit of leading Peter (audience) into a state of deepened and keener perception, thereby

compelling him to murder Jerry. Jerry's death, therefore, should not be considered a melodramatic ending, for his murder is aimed at transforming Peter's (the audience's) happy evening of idle entertainment into an unbelievable burden of guilt, for a crime he did not plan to commit. In theatrical terms, this means the total negation of the cathartic effect of purgating Peter's (the audience's) emotions and, instead, making him return home with the painful awareness of what he really is.

The fact that Albee (Jerry) wanted his audience to develop its perception towards his art is conveyed by Jerry's recurrent postponement of his narration of the zoo story. Through his constant testing, Jerry implies that he wants to know whether Peter is ready for a full understanding of the story. One is first led to this interpretation when Jerry submits Peter to a continuous questioning and gets to know him as an 'educated man' who cannot perceive and, thus, accept relativity of meaning ("What's the dividing line between upper-middle middle class and lower upper middle class?")<sup>12</sup>. A Man who is patronizing when bewildered, and who is bound to a conventional labelling of his favourite writers, is not a man who is ready for the absurd 'Zoo Story' as is unravelled at the end of the play.

Jerry's first hints about the right way to perceive a work of art are given in some of his apparently disconnected statements: "Sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly"<sup>13</sup>. By 'going out of his way', Albee implies that Peter should risk his established pattern of thinking by being forced to abandon his simplistic one-to-one correlation of concept and object. This is corroborated by Jerry's other antagonising comments: "What were you trying to do? Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeon-hole bit? Well, that's easy."<sup>14</sup>

What Jerry means is that Peter should not transfer his plain comprehension of logical thought to the interpretation of the 'Zoo Story'. He should not take what Jerry says literally but try to get at what is left unsaid, for meanings in Jerry's art are of imaginative or emotional kinds and not rational ones. The imaginative 'Zoo Story', built on seemingly unrelated levels of meaning would communicate nothing to people who are open only to a rational approach. For this reason, he points out what a creative interpretation should be like: "What I wanted to get at is the value difference between pornographic playing cards when you're a kid and pornographic playing cards when you're older. It's that when you're a kid you use the cards as a substitute for a real experience and when you're older you use real experience as as substitute for the fantasy."<sup>15</sup>

The grown-up man, Peter or the audience, should try to recapture the child's creative imagination for this is the essential condition for the process that transforms the imaginary and self-sufficient world of art into a metaphor of the real world.

But because he knows Peter has been conditioned not to put his imagination to work and is therefore, incapable of creating new meaningful relationships out of the free associations derived from his 'Zoo Story', Jerry decides to tell the tale of the dog. He also seems to imply that he is going to do with Peter what he has already done with the dog: "First I will try to kill the dog nicely then I will just kill him"<sup>16</sup>. What he means is that he will first lower himself to the level of Peter's inappropriate approach to art and tell him a well-engendered and moving story built up through understandable logical sequences of events, providing all the necessary descriptions with his mimetic abilities. One could say that through his vivid narrative language he has peopled the stage with characters performing a play within a realistic setting. In a way, it suggests a 'play', framed according to naturalistic-realistic conceptions, which Jerry, the creator, then mocks by transforming it into the parody that greatly contributes to the hilarious effect of the 'Zoo Story'. Though Jerry has succeeded in leading Peter into an almost Artaudian trance, Jerry knows that his art is not successful enough to achieve Peter's (the audience's) identification with his art. It can only get from Peter the same "free passage" he had with the dog. Though Peter is impressed by Jerry's realistic description, he still maintains a detached position towards art: "It's so... unthinkable. I find it hard to believe that people such as that really are".<sup>17</sup> The fact that Peter can still set a limit between fact and fiction and that he is still only patronizing towards, and bewildered by, the strangeness of the theme conveyed in the tale of the dog means failure to Jerry ("I... I don't understand what... I don't think I... Why did you tell me all this?"<sup>18</sup>) As the story was framed in accordance with naturalistic-realistic theatrical conventions, it might be inferred that Albee (Jerry) recognized the need to discard them. Again he mocks them by saying that as Peter is in the publishing business, he could make "a couple of hundred bucks (selling) the story to the Reader's Digest"<sup>19</sup>.

In his eagerness to make a true contact through his art. Jerry tickles Peter. By watching Peter's hysterical laughter, his subsequent reaction of calling him "Jerry" for the first time and his sincere confession that he had his "own zoo there for a moment"<sup>20</sup>, Jerry learns that he should affect the audience's mind by direct pressure on the senses. Peter is ready for Jerry's 'Zoo Story'.

Jerry impales himself on the knife Peter is holding and causes his own death. The idea of death in this context is associated with the idea of success and leads us to believe that Jerry considers the absurdist 'Zoo Story' a successful play in the sense that it permits a full expression of his new form of drama. The fact that he wants to emphasize the belief in his art and at the same time his trust in the newly converted Peter makes him insist that Peter pick up his book, quite sure that Peter will no longer use the 'book' (that is, art) as a form of escapism as Peter had intended on coming to Central Park.

In his recollections of his past Jerry is recognizable as a character and shares with Peter sexual impotence, inability to love, the same loneliness and the inability to communicate. He is still the one who, confined in his limitations, somewhat laments the fact that he doesn't know why he lives in such horrible, 'laughable' dwellings. Jerry is more of a character and less of a creator in curtailing the detachment from his art to the point of feeling sorry for the anguish he himself is causing Peter<sup>21</sup>. Jerry, more creator than a character, is identified by his detachment from his 'character's' (Peter's) feelings. This is his intention of pursuing his ideal art regardless of the means he might use, including the idea of giving up his life. Jerry, as author, is aware of his creation and dominates the whole play, controlling Peter's action at will and bending him to the utmost involvement. Jerry-creator reveals not only his concern with his technique for affecting the audience, but also, as we have seen before in the episode with the dog, his rejection of a logical discursive narrative for his new drama. The latter is far from his ideal of art as metaphor for the senselessness and cruelty that he sees in real life. Throughout the play we see him collecting from his real experience the raw material for his absurd 'Zoo Story' which, by embodying that necessary disintegration of plot, recalls Dillon's definition of plot in Absurdist dramas:

"... a series of actions and episodes related only by position complemented by unrelated words, phrases and sentences, leading to an impression of a ritualistic burlesque of life, whose climax is usually either a ritualistic burlesque of life and death or a repetition of the unrelated actions and episodes"<sup>22</sup>

Such a plot is the result of Jerry's creative flow of imagination, revealed at work in correlating the apparently different situations he has experienced in real life. Once we put them in a chronological order as they appear on the stage, we first imagine Jerry coming to Central Park wondering why in a zoo, animals are imprisoned in separate cells, as it were. Subsequently, Jerry recurrently brings together his visit to the zoo with his exploratory concern about human life. This implied correlation leads to Jerry's conclusion that people, by living in 'laughable' rooms, separate from their neighbours even when in the same dwellings, or in their confinement to a self-centred life, are like zoo animals living in cages.

Jerry-creator is seen in the imaginative metaphorical process of correlating all these repetitive and truthful situations, valid at different levels of existence and experience: birds in cages, people in flats, people rooted in the conformist apathy of bourgeois life, lions in different cages. He is identified as someone who comes onto the stage with an image of imprisonment which is extended and given a new dimension with each added association in an increasing progression from concreteness to abstractness; that life itself is an imprisonment, a cage, an escape from which leads inevitably to death. At the same time, what he attempts to create is a spectacle that offers "a marvellous complex of pure imagery, a poetry in space wherein language becomes one of a complex of expressive media"<sup>23</sup>. Concomitantly, he tries to bring spontaneity to the stage by composing and improvising a play directly on the stage.

If this reading is right, Albee has achieved that necessary coherence the Absurdist playwrights want to achieve in the form of drama they create. He succeeds in producing a metaphor for an existentialist vision of experience by presenting Jerry as without any preconceptions of precommitments in his exploratory attempts to achieve conceptualization in the 'void'. This conceptualization comes only after a bracketing of phenomena and experience, if at all.

A positive attitude towards imprisonment.

The cage and its implicit idea of imprisonment is evidently the chief image of the play. As the drama progresses the audience increasingly feels that Albee's cage is the last bullwark against a hostile environment. It appears that Albee is dealing with the Artaudian notion of cosmic cruelty where "the sky can still fall on our heads", a "kind of higher determinism" where "evil is permanent" (24). The image of the cage is one of Albee's main devices to achieve



the dominant mood of fear and menace that culminates in violence and cruelty.

For Peter's - a true representative of the status quo - the cage stands for a safe place in a vaguely defined void, where people can feel secure. But as Jerry tries to prove cage is not a place of refuge at all, but is in fact a replica of the insecurity of the outside world. As we have seen, Jerry's action of breaking the bars of the cage in *The Zoo Story* inevitably leads to death. Therefore, whatever bars may mean they definitely stand for something negative for they make man unable to see a world from which he is excluded. If we assume that beyond the bars of a cage Albee intends the existence of a world of ultimate truth never to be attained by finite human knowledge, we can also assume that, for him, man can never be absolutely free. But despite the inevitability of man's imprisonment as the natural condition of his own human nature, Albee also seems to imply that, ironically, man still has free choice in setting the dimensions of his own prison. In *The Zoo Story* he is dealing with two kinds of prisons: the limited prison of those who easily conform to their human limitations and the larger prison of those who try to find out who they really are. Albee seems to believe that those who choose the limited dimension of the first kind of prison, like Peter did, lose their human qualities and are therefore more like vegetables. Those who search for true knowledge are necessarily suffering characters, for they are afflicted with a despair for which they cannot find any logical explanation. The reason for their inability to find the real cause of their affliction is that it lies in the unattainable outer world, beyond the cage and beyond any comprehension. Jerry is a suffering character of this kind and the search for a logical explanation for his despair is the very motif for the metaphorical journey he makes "to the good old North". However these suffering characters can have a positive attitude towards their forever frustrated attempts to find absolute truth. Jerry has this kind of attitude. He is, as he calls himself, a transient man, who sets himself on a journey he does not want to stop even when he knows, beforehand, that he will never reach his destination. The very vagueness of his possible metaphorical journey reinforces the uncertainty of getting to his desired destination. As he says, "I'm going northerly... to the good old North". It seems that in this metaphorical journey, Jerry is brought to the ultimate knowledge of his limited nature and with that, the realisation that death is the only way to transcend his human finitude.

His death however should not be interpreted as that of a being who is giving up life because he thinks it is not worth living. The act of causing his own death is a heroic gesture of raising another man from blind acceptance of things to the same degree of awareness that he had before dying, or, to use Jerry's own words in the play, so as to raise Peter from the 'vegetal' condition to that of an 'animal'.

In the recollection of his life, Jerry progresses towards greater knowledge. By expanding his image of life as caught in a cage, Jerry realises that the world is framed according to repetitive patterns. However, despite the pattern, he sees that there is no logical connection between the sequence of events. But through the observation of the effects of his actions he turns each experience into the motivation for the next. In the general rhythmical action of the play, in its ups and downs on its way to a climax, each new experience is larger than the last. The repetition which Jerry sees in life suggests a Kierkegaardian view of experience. As G. Anders has pointed out "Kierkegaard found in 'repetition' a moral category of existence, and used the term to define the unremitting claim of old, but ever newly imposed obligation, which are the reverse of the merely 'interesting'"<sup>25</sup>. Once life has determined the recurrent pattern there is a moral obligation to undertake it. Even more than that the act of searching, as undertaken by Jerry, contains the very seed of knowledge and creation, and this is what he proves when he moves from his discouraging experience with the dog to his successful experiment with Peter. What he tries to prove in this latter experiment is, paradoxically, that the search for absolute truth is the only possibility if man is to redeem his sin of never being able to attain the unattainable. In other words, it is in this everlasting process of seeking and never finding his true self or true knowledge that man really is, (i.e. where his 'isness' lies) and really creates. Jerry realises that man can only be in the process of being and that his search is in itself a kind of creation. For Albee ultimately sees an aura of grandeur in man's ability to create, notwithstanding the drudgery of repetition. He sees a God in every man: "God who is a colored Queen who wears a kimono and plucks his eyebrows, who is a woman who cries with determination behind her closed door..."<sup>26</sup>

### Character as Creator

Because Albee has such a positive view of man he does not reduce Jerry to the stereotypic character without any energy, as is

so often found in French Absurdist dramatists. Consequently, he does not minimise characterisation. Nor does he reduce Jerry's responses to life to the merely mechanical. Jerry, whatever he might be, creator or character, delves into his past and conveys much personal information. And, unlike the inarticulate absurd character, Jerry even make direct statements in those awkward situations that he creates. He is not the typical dehumanized character. Albee has created in Jerry a character that suits and reasserts his humanist view of man.

### Conclusion

Assuming that this reading of the *Zoo Story* is coherent and bearing in mind that, even if coherent, it is just one of many possible interpretations vis-a-vis the puzzles the playwright creates, it can be concluded that Albee sees life as a series of repetitive experiences which are morally valid. This only partially supports Bigsby's approach to the play. As has been shown, while a positive attitude towards man's capacity to endure the repetitive experiences of life is an important ingredient it does not invalidate the characterization of the play as absurdist. By embodying in its very form the sort of puzzle which reveals modern man's sense of bewilderment *The Zoo Story* is easily fitted into Esslin's framework for the Theatre of the Absurd. If it were not for Jerry's characterization the degree of fit would be total. However, as has been demonstrated, this characterization is an ingenious device of Albee's to teach his audience how to respond to the absurdist form of art. It is worth adding that this didactic spirit is the product of Albee's desire to wake his compatriotes from the 'American Dream'.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Albee, Edward. In Three Plays, Jonathan Cape, 1967.
2. Esslin, Martin. The Theatre of the Absurd, Penguin, 1968.
3. Bigsby, C.W.E. Albee, Oliver and Boyd, 1969.
4. Esslin, Martin, op. cit. page 25.
5. Esslin, Martin, op. cit., page 25.
6. Op. cit.. page 26 'It is broadly based on ancient strands of Western tradition and has its exponents in Britain, Spain, Italy , Germany, Switzerland, Eastern Europe and in the United States as well as in France'
7. Esslin, Martin. Brief Chronicles, 1970, page 220.
8. Op. cit. page 221.
9. Op. cit. page 221.
10. Albee, Edward, The Zoo Story. page 22.
11. Op. cit. page 23.
12. Op. cit. page 23.
13. Op. cit. page 25.
14. Op. cit. page 25.
15. Op. cit. page 32.
16. Op. cit. page 37.
17. Op. cit. page 34.
18. Op. cit. page 44.
19. Op. cit. page 44.
20. Op. cit. page 49.
21. His compassion, for example, is revealed by sympathizing with the pain he caused Peter in the murder scene.
22. Dillon, Perry Claude. The Characteristics of the French Theatre of the Absurd in the Plays of Edward Albee and Harold Pinter, Drama Review, III, 1970.
23. Roberts, V. Mowry. The Nature of Theatre, Chicago Press, 1971, page 250
24. Op. cit., page 250.
25. Anders, Gunther. Franz Kafka. London. Bowes & Bowes, 1960, page 37.
26. The Zoo Story, op. cit., p. 42,