Theatre of the Absurd
A Return to Plato’s Cave
By
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“Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes. It’s awful!” This was the reaction of one patron on January 5th, 1953 when Samuel Beckett’s play, Waiting for Godot was first performed at a small theatre in Paris. Others called it “incomprehensible and pretentious.” When it was performed in London two years later, theatre critic, Philip Hope-Wallace, wrote a mixed review calling it acutely boring, inexplicit and deliberately fatuous and flat. Another London reviewer, Kenneth Tynan, who actually liked the play, wrote, that by all known criteria it is a “dramatic vacuum... [with] no plot, no climax, no [finale]; no beginning, no middle and no end... Waiting for Godot frankly jettisons everything by which we recognize theatre.”¹ For many, the play was so different from any kind of theatre they’d ever seen, it was but a maddening and meaningless waste of time.

But in 1957 the San Francisco’s Actors’ Workshop decided to perform Waiting for Godot for the inmates at San Quentin. It was chosen partly because there were no women in the cast, but, according to dramatist, Martin Esslin, its performers were worried; “How were they to face one of the toughest audiences in the world with a highly obscure, intellectual play that had produced near riots among a good many highly sophisticated audiences in Western Europe?”² After the performance, however, a critique in the San Quentin News, admitted that many of the inmates had come hoping for girls and laughs. “When this didn’t appear,” it stated, “they audibly fumed and audibly decided to wait until the house lights dimmed before escaping. They listened and looked two minutes too long—and stayed. Left at the end. All shook...”³

The inmates at San Quentin totally got Waiting for Godot. One said, “Godot is society.”⁴ Another said, “He’s the outside.”⁵ “Why did a play of the supposedly esoteric avant garde make so immediate and so deep an impact on an audience of convicts?”⁶ This is the question Martin Esslin asks us to consider in the introduction of his seminal work The Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin, a Hungarian born English producer, journalist, and Stanford professor of drama, coined this phrase, Theatre of the Absurd, with the publication of his book in 1961, which has since become part of common nomenclature. In fact, when he wrote the preface to the 40th anniversary

¹ http://dangerousminds.net/comments/very_unpromising_material_a_review_for_becketts_waiting_for_godot_from_1955
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid., p. 20.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid.
edition, Esslin said he was surprised the term had become so cliché. “Whenever there was mayhem in a parliamentary debate from Washington to Luxemburg,” he said, “I would, with some embarrassment, read headlines like, ‘Theatre of the Absurd in the Senate.’”

But what he meant by this new dramatic genre is very specific. Compared to the usual standards, *Theatre of the Absurd* shows plays, he explains, often “regarded as impertinent and outrageous imposters,” that have “no story or plot to speak of,” are “without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets,” seeming more like “reflections of dreams and nightmares,” with dialogue that “often consist of incoherent babblings.” *Waiting for Godot*, for example, is about two men standing around waiting for someone named Godot to arrive. At the end of the first day they decide to leave, but don’t actually go. The second day is pretty much the same as the first. They even have much the same conversations and experiences as the day before. But as night falls, Godot still doesn’t come and they, again, decide to leave. But the play ends with them just standing there, waiting. That’s it. The play really is about two guys just waiting for Godot.

This overwhelming sense of aimlessness in the work of Beckett and other playwrights at the time, emerged, Esslin suggests, because humanity itself had become aimless. Science and modernism had “discredited” our old religious beliefs, he says, “as cheap and somewhat childish illusions.” And, after World War II, our faith in their secular substitutes, “progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies,” was also shattered. Yet the Theatre of the Absurd is different from the plays of Existentialists like Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre because, both, according to Esslin, “proclaim a tacit conviction that logical discourse can offer valid solutions, that the analysis of language will lead to the uncovering of basic concepts—Platonic ideas.” But the Theatre of the Absurd, he explains, “has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images.” So he calls it *absurd* rather than *existential angst*, because, “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from [one’s] religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots [humanity] has lost; all [one’s] actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”

If you’ve never seen *Waiting for Godot* or been to a Theatre of the Absurd, imagine a toddler pounding at the discordant keys of a piano. The child is untrained, the music has no direction or order, and the sound is unnerving. Now imagine going to a concert and hearing that same hellish sound for two hours performed by adults claiming it is music. Most patrons would rush out in rage to demand a refund. That

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7 Ibid., p. 11.
8 Ibid., p. 21.
9 Ibid., p. 22.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., p. 24
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 23.
was the initial reaction to *Waiting for Godot* and the Theatre of the Absurd. It just didn’t make any sense.

The reason I bring it up today, the reason, like Esslin, that I find it so fascinating, is that it captivated those who were already, literally, captivated—the inmates at San Quentin. I also, particularly, appreciate his contrasting it with Existentialist Theatre by noting that Camus and Sartre wrote their plays to makes sense of senselessness, in search of what he specifically calls, “Platonic ideas.” Who doesn’t recall Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave, describing a civilization of cave dwellers captivated by the display of the shadows their dim firelight casts upon the rock-walls of their unknown prison. After one of them discovers the world outside the cave and his eyes adjust to its bright light, he tries to return to lead everyone into the light. But he can no longer manage the darkness and aimlessly stumbles about. When the cave dwellers discover upon him, they presume he must be drunk and think he’s gone mad when he begins speaking about the outside world.

Ever since Plato and his famous allegory, Western culture has gravitated toward the light, like moths fluttering about the fire, in hope of finding knowledge, understanding, and meaning. We relate to the enlightened man who can only stumble about in the dark, and we dismiss the cave dwellers as primitive, unenlightened people who know as much about the real world as a toddler pounding a piano knows about music.

Yet, as Victoria Nelson reminds us in her philosophical work, *The Secret Life of Puppets*, before Plato, “Greek philosophy was rooted in a tradition of seeking wisdom in the darkness, not the light, via dream incubation in caves.”14 In addition to the Greek god Hermes, the myths of most cultures include guides to the underworld, like the Egyptian Thoth, the Roman Mercury, the Hindu Pushan, and the Norse Valkyries. In many of these myths, the gods themselves go through tremendous ordeals in order to enter the underworld as seekers of wisdom. The Norse god Odin gives up his right eye to find it, and the Babylonian god, Gilgamesh travels there in hope of discovering the secret to immortality.

Plato, by contrast, presents the cave as a place of limitation and lies, as a place, says Nelson, “the exceptional person is obliged to escape from if [one] is to perceive the truth.”15 It coincides well with Platonized Christianity’s notion of Hell as a place of eternal torment. But Hell too comes from the Norse word *Hellir*, referring to, according to Jean Shinoda Bolen, “a uterine shrine or sacred cave of rebirth…”16 Hell, so dreaded by the Christian faith, is but another word for “womb.” So which is it, a place of suffering or of rebirth?

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15 Nelson, ibid.
The Theatre of the Absurd asks us to return to the cave, not to bring others into the light, but to let our eyes adjust to the darkness, and learn, again, to see its hidden truths. But we cannot go there if our eyes are satiated with light, unless, like Odin, we are willing to give up an eye, becoming partly blind, in order to discover its dark secrets and forgotten wisdom. If we stay in the world outside the cave we may shed more light on what is already known to us, but we must return to the dark if we are to discover what is still unknown and unseen.

Yet, as Sun worshippers, lovers of bright, shiny, golden objects that glisten and sparkle in the light, we have come mostly to associate wisdom with enlightenment. We call our geniuses “brilliant,” our greatest experts, “luminaries,” and the most beautiful among us, “radiant.” At a bare minimum, we expect a person with any intelligence at all to be literate, the root of which is the word “light.” And, like our planet circling the sun, we gravitate most towards those among us we call stars.

Yet what happens when, in our reverence for the light we come to fear and loathe the dark? I submit that today we are seeing the results of this mindset and are, like moths, burning up in the firelight we thought would save us from the Hell we fear. For what is global warming but a result of all our sun worshipping? In our rush for gold and other “luxuries,” the root of which also means, “light,” luxuries like fresh fruits and vegetables year round, and perpetual progress and economic growth every quarter, we have created constant summer—a world in which, if we don’t do something soon, there will be no more winter, fall, or spring. Without an equal reverence for the dark, for the winter, for rest and sleep and cold and stillness, we deplete our resources, our energy, and create a world without a Sabbath season, without winter, with the time necessary to rest and recreate. And without the hell of winter, without returning to that dark womb, there can be no spring, no rebirth, and we end up, as we have, with only summer, perpetual harvest, and our mad rush to deplete the Earth’s waning resources.

Another tragic consequence of sun worshipping has been racism and the oppression of indigenous peoples round the world, but especially in this place we call the United States, built upon the extermination of 20 million Indigenous people, the worst genocide in human history, and the enslavement, segregation, and continued oppression of those among us with darker skins. Could such prejudice in favor of light skin also be rooted in our love of brightness? As Unitarian Universalist Religious Educator, Jacqui James puts it, “We shape language and we are shaped by it. In our culture, white is esteemed. It is heavenly, sunlike, clean, pure, immaculate, innocent, and beautiful. At the same time, black is evil, wicked, gloomy, depressing, angry, sullen. Ascribing negative and positive values to black and white enhances the institutionalization of this culture’s racism.”

And, alas, feeling so enlightened has caused us to crave certainty like an addiction, and to feel threatened by those who disagree with our bright ideas. Certainty rewards our hungry brains with the rush of dopamine and we dare not sacrifice such pleasure by ever admitting we might be wrong. We dare not let doubt seep in. Doubt is unbearable to us. For not knowing is a sin and those who don’t know should be ashamed of themselves. They should be ridiculed, silenced, destroyed. Gravitating toward the light has given us an era of Fox News, an era in which those with whom we disagree are demonized and dismissed, and in which there is no room for questioning what we already know to be true, and era in which the unknown has no voice.

If this is so, if, like mythical Icarus, we have flown too close to the sun and our wax wings, meant to liberate us from our darkened prison, have melted and we find ourselves now plummeting toward our end, toward global warming and racism and fascism, perhaps it is time for us to stumble into the cave again, to return to the womb in order to emerge anew, with new wisdom and new ways of living and being in the world and with each other. “The more the soul advances,” wrote Saint John of the Cross, “the more she walks in the dark of not knowing...”

As the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke says;

You, darkness, that I come from
I love you more than all the fires
that fence in the world,
for the fire makes a circle of light for everyone
and then no one outside learns of you.

But the darkness pulls in everything—
shapes and fires, animals and myself,
how easily it gathers them!—
powers and people—
and it is possible a great presence is moving near me.

I have faith in nights.

Or, as Jacqui James puts it, “The words white and light don’t need to be destroyed or ignored, only balanced and reclaimed in their wholeness. Imagine a world that had only light—or dark. We need both. Dark and light. Light and dark.”

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19 James, ibid.