An Approach to Absurd Theatre in the Twentieth Century

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By

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This book is dedicated to my daughter

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who devoted the most to me and my humble work.

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I wish to offer my special thanks to Ms Anindita Thakur, who went through my manuscript painstakingly and arranged matters carefully.

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FOREWORD

This short book volunteers to take a small walk on the concourse of an immense subject—the evolution and significance of the later twentieth-century absurd theatre. It attempts to discuss how this emblematic theatre grew up, gradually developed by degrees, and what could be the perspective behind this heretofore unseen theatre art. Wherever twentieth-century literature, drama in particular, forms a selected part of the academic curriculum, the optimum requirement of the students is to arrive at a pointed analytical appraisal of the emergence of absurdist theatre since the mid-twentieth century. Most books dealing with the subject describe issues piecemeal, often with scant information, without recourse to presenting precisely punctilious feedback to achieve the full gamut of the discipline. Books and available study materials do not often hit the bull's eye with regard to this milestone of the later twentieth-century hitherto unseen theatrical know-how. This study keeps in mind a considerable number of interested readers who would like to have a distinct natural topography of the coastline at one go, leading to an intellectual analysis of the marked contemporaneous events in dramaturgy. Absurd theatre craft might exert a perceptible influence on understanding the issues we are confronted with. We often fall foul of them but cannot work out why this happens. What remains is utter confusion, exposing a disorientated and dishevelled state of mind. In absurdist theatre, the audience has a "symbolic transformation of experience", as Susanne Langer describes in respect of the images and words.

> Speech is in fact the readiest active termination of that basic process in the human brain which may be called *symbolic transformation of experiences.* The fact that it makes elaborate communication with others possible becomes important at a somewhat later stage.[1]

The question may arise as to why the higher consciousness of the playwright makes little impression on the scattered social conscience or, to put it otherwise, humanity's submerged concern vis-à-vis its inexorable existential predicament. To this question, no peremptory subtle answer is found to reach beyond the fact that possibly our greater faculties resist modifying the lesser, so much so that social repression looks almost devastating. Contemporary people feel weary of their identified individuality.

There's the rub. Sometimes, it is said with regard to absurd theatre that humanity has lost its way. No one has ever lost their way but simply followed a predictable path with numberless dead ends. People's endless pursuits to know the unknown have taken them to space, having rather depleted the hydra-headed investigation about facts on the familiar Earth. Wright Morris aptly says:

> If we are to be more rather than less human – one of our many stimulating options – we will turn from what we see around us, and attend to the promptings within us. The imagination made us human, but *being* human, becoming more human, is a greater burden than we imagined. [2]

Absurd playwrights permeate the territory of human sensibility, cutting the cross-section of human language diagonally. The basic existential angst of modern life catches us unawares to pins us to a stunned state of confusion, where we are helplessly confronted with an alarming inadequacy of language. We do not mean what we say; we do not say what we mean. We are stuck under an excruciating inexpressibility. There is an existential obligation to express: what to express, how to express, and wherefrom to express—is the query that baffles us. With frail catamarans of alienated, isolated, confused life, we float aimlessly, sans purpose, in the perilous sea of an existential quandary. This study has tried to present in brief how absurdist playwrights have artistically grafted this—language has been held upside down and inside out, with the unique mastery of putting language onstage by a Beckett, a Pinter, an Ionesco or an Albee. They endeavoured to focus on how the inadequacy of language redoubles human helplessness of expression, creating its absurdity.

The existential predicament squeezes all cherished sensibilities today so agonisingly that we falter continually in expressing what we feel. Expressions betray us. What we see in an absurd play is the willed irrationalism of humanity ensnared by its fatal passion for logic. The latter half of the twentieth century heralded a new consciousness and had to fumble with a new idiom of expression. The dialogue of absurdist plays may be said to be structured on this new idiom knitted to the current time—a realistic idiom marked by bad syntax, tautologies, platitudes, pleonasms, repetitions, irreverences, non-sequiturs, self-contradictions, mannerisms, lingual gibberish and inconsequence. Absurdist playwrights skillfully show, as does Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco or Adamov, that real-life dialogue bluntly refuses to run along logically from point to point. The new dramatic idiom of the absurdist plays emanated out of the playwright's sharp hearing of day-to-day talks exchanged in a society plastered with the irrationality of

conversation. Whereas Artaud pleaded, Beckett gradually grew withdrawn; Pinter, Ionesco or Adamov remained riveted to an unremitting quest for a new theatre language and diagnosed its critical sickness, tuning it to add a new dimension to an artist's use of words in the post-naturalist theatre. With a decided negative capability, Pinter, Beckett, or Adamov faced, in the existential arena, such situations when language by itself registered the human predicament. Mostly, the selective dialogue of the absurdist theatre borders upon the language of ambiguity, using the spotlight of T.S. Eliot's notion of the "objective co-relative", affirming that form and content are diffused in an authentic work of art, creating a private system of language. Absurd drama made a new landmark in the post-anti-rationalist, anti-realist, surrealistic literary movement, calling for the liberation of thought from the clutches of logic and reason, claiming that art should originate through conflict with the subconscious.

It is emphasised that a word, an image or a sequence of them may simultaneously carry a number of meanings. What we find in the plays is that the dialogic processes relate one to another but do not give any sequential ordering that could make a logical speech. The relationship between the words is not stated explicitly. What happens is that between the discursive statement of the dramatic dialogue and the presentational symbolism embedded therein looks flaccid. Images succeed with rapidity but are not subject to the full exposure of a precise metaphor. As a result, absurdist plays give out passages revealing not disorder but a complex ordering of attitude and a belief achieved subtly over and above the discursive statement. Beneath an abstract conviction of what is stated, there lie conflicting attitudes because the dialogue exchanged between characters is not an idea but a contemplation in relation to a particular theatrical setting.

The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), the founder of analytical psychology, did not agree with Freud about the notion of organised religion, as he considered the religious impulse as a natural and universal part of human consciousness. Jung's theory of "universal consciousness" permanently separated him from Freud, who rejected the concept of the collective unconscious. Jung's theory of the unconscious is that human beings are connected to their ancestors through a set of shared experiences to give meaning to their lives.

Jung accepted Freud's theory about the subconscious as a repository of primary desires. He also believed in the Freudian concept that many forms of neurosis were the result of the conflict between the conscious and unconscious. However, Jung firmly held that Freud could not take into account the "collective consciousness" as an expansion of the id. All human beings share a subconscious mind that stores memories of others, dead or

alive. Jung holds that we carry the memories of our ancestors in our subconscious. We use this collective unconscious to assign structure and meaning to the world. In creative work, the psychological process of differentiation of the self out of each individual's conscious and unconscious elements matters. Ideas which seem more or less organised are simply out of sight beyond the horizon and can be brought into view only through the exercise of mind. Jung paid more attention to the emergence of ideas out of non-verbal communication. In the absurd plays, we find that linguistic exercise makes certain symbols undifferentiated totalities out of which clear ideas may emerge. Absurdity is born when the chain of daily social movements and gestures is broken. A new consciousness emanates. The world that seemed so long to have order now appears only as a failing rhythm. There are many manifestations of the absurd with regard to a mirror image of humanity showing a familiar and, at the same time, an unfamiliar persona. This, again, is also the absurd. The absurd moment may come in a car, in clubs and cafes, or in a public or private workplace where the observer can see the world incarnate.

Since 1956, when John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* was staged, language has become the central concern of a number of significant playwrights from whom a whole new phase of modern drama has emerged as a theatre of language rather than of performance. These new playwrights attempted a deeply ironic dismantling of assumptions about the conventional language of drama as a vital ingredient of dramaturgy. Absurd theatre strives for highly compressed minimalist dramatic texts that preserve strangeness beyond casual reading or performances. Many absurdist plays exude existentialist 'angst' by means of carefully designed verbal filigree. These plays are successful exercises in presenting the least and evoking the most. At the same time, they are also remarkably suggestive of confused, shifting, screaming, agonising, bewildered states of mind. Linguistic patterns may be recognised as the pulse of absurd plays. Absurdist playwrights strive to display an interest in investigating the process of a very subtle perception attained through a highly sensitive theatre language. C.W.E. Bigsby has rightly pointed out that: "It is arguably non-revolutionary to wish to insert the word between the self and its realisation between the action and the reaction." [3]

In his "Author's Preface" to *Miss Julie* [*Fröken Julie*] (1888), August Strindberg, a forerunner of the modern existentialistic plays, wrote: "Life is not so idiotically mathematical that only the great eat the small; it is just as common for a bee to kill a lion or at least drive it mad." Again, in his note

to *A Dream Play* [*Ett Drömpsel*] (1902), Strindberg has further elaborated that:

> Anything can happen, everything is possible and plausible. Time and space do not exist. Upon an insignificant background of real life events the imagination spins and weaves new patterns: a blend of memories, experiences, pure inventions, absurdities, and improvisations.

The purpose of later twentieth-century absurd theatre is to get at the genuine experience of the spectators. If the playwright deviates from this purpose, the theatre may run the risk of losing ground. A new sense of reality is brought into theatre with the advent of new drama. Mature twentieth-century theatre tore apart the glossy wallpaper of a living room language provided by the well-made play system. In absurd theatre, the audience receives implied and insinuated clues; the playwright, however, maintains detachment and withdraws, leaving the audience to draw its own inference. Silence, too, moves in, creating a language of its own. In absurd theatre, there is a communication that exists beyond what ordinary words can effectively carry forward, and it is actually concerned with direct personal feeling.

Notes

[1] *Philosophy in a New Key*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1942, 2nd edn., 1951, p. 9)
[2] *About Fiction,* New York: Harper & Row, 1975, P. 182
[3] See, J.R. Hollis, *Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence.* Southern Illinois University Press, 1970, P. 13.

PROLOGUE

Drama is a particular form of literature composed with an eye to performance. A distinction is often pencilled between drama that concerns the written text and theatre concerned only with the performance of the script. Western civilisation accorded high importance to drama and dramatic arts: it is dignified and influential. Beginning with the classical Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles, through Shakespeare to poet, playwright and actor Molière (John-Baptiste Peoquelin, 1622–1673) in France; and critic, poet, playwright, novelist, and theatre director Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) in Germany. It advanced in Norway through the hands of playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) and in Sweden via the prolific poet and playwright Johan August Strindberg (1849–1912). For a long period, Western theatre emphasised thought and catered to philosophical or thesis plays. However, dramatic art with a selected group of performers stands for primary presentation in public. Each of them represents one of the characters of the play. The story is put into the picture through the interactions of characters, revealing their thoughts through language within a definite visual setting.

Greek philosopher Aristotle divided the elements of drama into plot, character, theme, language, and spectacle knitted to the three unities of time, place, and action. Older plays, including those of Shakespeare or Dryden (1631–1700), almost entirely consist of spoken words, called dramatic dialogue, because language is a vital and often a dominant dramatic element. The power and impact are visible in the poetic dramas of the early-nineteenth-century English romantic authors and in much of what is called high comedy or comedy of manners of seventeenth-century England. However, the more theatre art advanced, playwrights were further drawn towards plotless and non-verbal performances especially in later twentieth-century drama. The latter tradition emphasised nuances of society conversations and behaviour patterns and made prominent use of witty dialogue, puns and other verbal devices. The later plays showed tendencies to non-spoken materials—such as stage direction, dialogue delivery, stage décor, symbols, physical surroundings, gesture and movement, and so on. Moreover, drama emphasised spectacles such as opera, musical comedy, nineteenth-century melodrama, and shows known as ‘masques’[1].

During the Renaissance, there were two types of traditional dramatic forms—tragedy and comedy. Shakespeare brought in history plays, presenting national history in dramatic form. In Italy, dramatists started mixing elements of the two traditional types of theatre in order to give shape to a third kind, having a mixture of moods. They named it tragicomedy. Over time, tragedy remained to explore the profound philosophic questions of good and evil with reference to humanity's position in the universe. Comedy delineated people in their social aspects and personal relationships to become a befitting form of social commentary and criticism, over and above simple public amusement. Comedy, having underscored the wit and style of the upper classes, became effective using physical humour and crude verbal wordplay intended to amuse rather than mock social behaviour. As a non-literary form, there was farce which can be traced back to classical Greece. 'Melodrama' too emerged as a recognised type of theatre in the nineteenth century, exploring emotions from the 'sentimental comedy'. Having harped on human feelings, it sought to evoke audience sympathy for the characters.

Drama served a variety of purposes. The leading Roman lyric poet Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65–8 BCE, composed *Ars Poetica* [*The Art of Poetry*], c. 10–8 BCE, the date is subject to much controversy) and advised poets on the art of writing poetry and drama, saying that drama is designed to "delight and instruct". In drama, some degree of both may be present. At the outset, plays emphasised instruction. The Renaissance saw drama as both entertaining as well as instructional. More serious and literary dramatic work from the eighteenth century onwards encouraged audiences to be better informed and more thoughtful about socio-moral and political issues. As an art form, drama, after all, is neither about entertainment nor instruction only. Instead, it seeks to provide an aesthetic and artistic experience. In addition to pleasure-seeking and inquisitiveness about life's ironies, theatre audiences nevertheless long for variegated knowledge worthy of bringing in agreeable and aesthetic experiences intensified by the public nature of theatre art designed for open presentation on the stage[2].

Drama relates to society and establishes an immediate empathy. Actors, audiences and the stage are the three essential parts of theatre, the fourth being the performance or the creative work in production, presenting an anecdote about some aspect of human life and experience. Theatre performance requires collaborative efforts of creative people working together towards a common pursuit, which is theatre production. Playwrights like Bertolt Brecht, Athol Fugard (1932–), Badal Sircar (1925–2011) and the ilk believed that theatre is particularly suited to stimulate social change.

It may, however, be stated that the central purpose of drama has always been to provide a means for a society to reflect upon itself and its beliefs.

The twentieth-century theatre movement stressed that the purpose of presenting drama is neither conventional entertainment nor instruction but an intensified aesthetic and artistic experience. Modern experimental theatre imposes serious challenges to the common general assumptions of the audience, with its revolutionary potential to provide a means for introspection. Modern audiences may indeed expect theatre to bestow new insight and understanding about the socio-political and personal complexities of contemporary times. It has been critically observed that: "For the playwright, a work of art is an autonomous universe, governed by its own laws. It is not an imitation of what we call our world, nor is it totally unlike that world; one could say that it is a self-contained construct, parallel to ours."[3]

Theatre audience differs widely from readers, aesthetes, or music lovers. Theatre historians trace the origin of theatre to myth and rituals found in dances and performances by masked dancers during ceremonies. The terms presentational and representational theatre are used to describe two different approaches to accomplishing the goal of a production. In the presentational style of performance, the actors explicitly act out a script on the stage in a forthright manner with all physical and equipment in order. Traditional theatre falls into this category. A representational style of production evolved in Europe around the mid-nineteenth century as it set about to show candid truths about normal existence within recognisable environments. Two theatre movements started—Realism in the 1850s and Naturalism in the 1870s. They sought to present familiar characters in a specific set of known external conditions. Visual elements such as clothes, furniture, and other stage properties became specifically important. Playwrights who pioneered this realistic theatre style include Ibsen in Norway, Strindberg in Sweden, Zola in France, and Chekov and Tolstoy in Russia.

Theatre is not only a literary but a performing art as well. It is a diverse and complex art as a means of human experience—it gives an awareness of togetherness. Audiences inside an auditorium differ in multifarious ways, yet the audience is *one* as fellow beings, the *Homo sapiens*. Spectators wait in avid expectation for that moment when the stage finally opens up, the auditorium lights dim, and finally go out; all extraneous sounds are eliminated, and all clamour, chatter and whispers stop. Spectators are prepared to be tuned to the dramatic action in order to be an integral part of the onstage happenings, to receive a theatrical experience of the familiar, as well as the unfamiliar world, and listen with rapt attention to the dialogue that apparently follows conversational speech patterns

closely.[4] Theatre functions as a mirror—it reflects life comprehensively and focuses on its contours, topography, and concave and convex concealed corners.

"Drama" derived from *dran*, literally - "to do" or "something done", is a Greek term, meaning a deed action on the stage. "Theatre" originates from the Greek *theatron* (literally a "place where something is seen"). Words and play patterns in a theatre revolve around the onstage action, having the potential for "doing" or "becoming." Therefore, in the modern sense, *theatre* refers to a composite conception—viewing, hearing and experiencing, all charged together. Theatre art is insulated by a life force of its own that distinguishes it from other audio-visual arts, including cinema, a very bloodless substitute. Theatre throbs with the vibration of *life* emanating out of the *dramatis personae,* enacting their roles on the stage as animated living and breathing beings. Language differs considerably from day-to-day speech, though it is purposely created for the performers to speak and for the audience to hear. Jacob Korg rightly considers that: "Linguistic experiments an essential element of literary modernism …. None of the themes and methods identified with modern literature is more indicative of the modern spirit than its treatment of language."[5]

Like in life, what occurs in the theatre holds the potential for mistakes, failure, improvisation, as well as intense emotion. Theatre performance analyses the mundane world we do, re-do and undo continuously in life until we die. Here comes the magic of contemporary theatre; its devices transform the text into a life-script. The audience hears the spoken words, recognises symbols and signs, dips into sub-text, and gradually absorbs comprehensive theatre language. Communication takes shape through gestures, movements, motley onstage visuals, and hybrid light-and-sound effects to form a total idea about the play it witnesses. The theatre of Jean-Jacques Bernard, around the late 1920s, was considered able to wield a profound impact on modern theatre, to fall back upon the dramatic possibilities inherent in the gaps between bits of dialogue known as 'the theatre of silence'.

Bertolt (Eugen Bertolt Friedrich) Brecht (1898–1956), a German theatre practitioner, poet and playwright (first theatrical success in Munich), moved to Berlin in 1924 and wrote his first play, *Baal* (1918, not performed until 1923). His early writings are indebted to Expressionism, which later provided the political mainspring of his work. By his theory of the 'epic theatre', Brecht wanted the audience to be jarred and jolted into a particular consciousness with regard to the possibility of altering their situation. Brecht became a leading theoretician of epic theatre, which he later called "dialectical theatre," which was supposed to be "instructive theatre."

It was the influence of Hegel (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 1770–1831) and a strong belief in the theory of dialectical materialism[6] of the German philosopher, political theorist, and socialist revolutionary Karl Heinrich Marx (1818–1883) that the living environment should be brought inside in a big and significant way. Brecht considered that the stage should be educational, and the dramatic chorus should enlighten the spectator about the unknown facts. When the background comes to the front of the stage, people's activities are subjected to criticism. Spectators are shown those persons who are aware of their deeds and who are unaware. They are required to be in a dialectical and alienated relationship to the drama[7].

Eric Bentley, in an article in the *Theatre Arts* (London, March 1950), rejected the old mystical French theories of drama, holding that these have been fostered "by the modern flight from decision and the self".[8] This reaction against magic and mystery has, in the long run, led to Brecht's concept of "alienation". Alienation stands for a style of theatrical production which prevents the identification of the spectators with the characters. As Bentley was concerned that a religious play could very well be a mechanical chant, similarly, there lurks the suspicion that 'epic' theatre may turn to assume a purely political dimension. Critics who support 'epic' theatre must also allow a religious conception of theatre, which establishes an equilibrium between the forces of easily believed religious rituals and those of sensibility and intelligence. Even when our mind is grasping the infinite, when we share communion with the actors, we do so because we come to the theatre normally with a desire to accept the make-believe and to know that we can see it anytime as it really is or judge it afterwards. If we are unwilling to surrender our individuality on such occasions, we surely miss the supreme moments of theatre. We enjoy a play through a feeling of communion; we judge or examine it later. A play, it may be pointed out, can never be judged as an intellectual dialogue, which may be conveniently read, even if not performed, as a dramatic performance to be felt in one's bones and should not be taken as an exercise in thought. J. L. Styan rightly observed that: "It is not the words alone which make the play, but the vivid dramatic impressions which the words can create".[9]

The theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for such who wished not just to *explain* the world but also to *change* it. Therefore, we had both philosophy and instruction. Brecht explained that the stage should:

> Incorporate an element of narrative in its dramatic productions…. the most important transactions between people could no longer be shown simply by personifying the motive forces or subjecting the characters to invisible metaphysical powers. To make these transactions

> intelligible, the environment in which the people lived had to be brought to bear in a big and "significant" way.

Not only did the background adopt an attitude to the events on the stage … but the actors, too, refrained from going over wholly into their roles, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him.

The production took the subject matter, and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems "the most obvious thing in the world", it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up. What is "natural" must have the force of what is startling. This is the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. People's activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different. It was all a great change. The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – it will never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh. The epic theatre's spectators say: I'd never have thought it—That's not only the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable—It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary—That's great art; nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.[10]

The origins of absurd theatre are as obscure as the canon of plays associated with it. Emerging in the late 1950s, after the theatre of Sartre (1905–1980) and Camus (1913–1960), absurd theatre, a blanket term used for those controversial playwrights, had not been a conscious movement, with no organised school of playwrights claiming any such taxonomy. On the contrary, they saw themselves as individual artists and viewed their theatrical exercise as nothing more than an expression of their personal vision of the world. Playwrights such as Ionesco (1912–2004), Beckett (1906–1989), Genet (1910–1986), Adamov (1908–1970), Albee (1928–2016) and Pinter (1930–2008) rejected any such label outright. Albee was deeply offended because, as he said, he had never heard such a term 'absurd' before. Beckett and Pinter, too, felt highly embarrassed when faced the questions regarding the substance of their plays. In a speech in Hamburg in 1970 delivered as an acceptance address of the Hamburg Shakespeare Prize, Pinter expressed his surprise about labelling his plays with any token name:

> "Once many years ago, I found myself engaged uneasily in a public discussion on theatre. Someone asked me what my work was 'about'. I replied with no thought at all and merely to frustrate this

> line of enquiry: 'The weasel under the cocktail cabinet.' That was a great mistake. Over the years, I have seen that remark quoted in a number of learned columns. It has now seemingly acquired a profound significance, and is seen to be a highly relevant and meaningful observation about my own work. But for me the remark meant precisely nothing."[11]

The Romanian-French playwright Eugène Ionesco (1909–94) wrote that his plays are not exercises in absurdity but denunciations of our decaying language. So how could they produce plays so uncannily similar in tone, tenor, and timbre in their outright rejection of the conventions of traditional theatre practice? These playwrights shared a more or less identical intellectual outlook and a common urge to interrelate the social situation through a different form of theatre art unexplored effectually hitherto and rebelled against the constrictive conditions of their environment. The playwrights, drinking from the bottles labelled "absurd," attempt to infuse into the audience their state of anxiety and confusion in the face of an inexplicable universe. They were all one in opposing the conventional bourgeois realism and naturalistic techniques. Leaning on poetic metaphor outwardly to project the within-the-mind scenario, the images of absurdist theatre tend to assume the characters of fantasy, dreams, and illusory imagination. What is important for them to lay bare as far as practicable is the playwright's emotional perception of an 'inner reality', as is done by Beckett in *Happy Days* (1961)[12].

Absurdist theatre may be considered a groundbreaking, exciting and progressive movement in the history of drama and theatre, but traditionally orientated critics did not know what to make of it. Many of them were outraged and considered absurd drama obscure and obfuscating since these plays flout all theatrical conventions[13]. However, Alan Sinfield quite perceptively points out:

> The new audiences, whose social validation depended upon academic attainment, welcomed intellectually demanding plays. As in the modern classics of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce which came into vogue at universities, obscurity seemed the mark of a profound engagement with life.[14]

Camus defined absurd as:

> In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a

> promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.[15]

Albert Camus defines the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942):

> In certain hours of lucidity the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their senseless pantomime, makes stupid everything around them. A man speaking on the telephone behind a glass partition – one cannot hear him but observes his trivial gesturing. One asks oneself why he is alive. This malaise in front of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable let down, when faced with the image of what we are, this "nausea" … is absurd.[16]

For authors like Beckett or Ionesco, this paradox leaves human action, aspirations and emotions merely ironical. No redeeming message comes from God. On the contrary, it gets delivered by a mute and deaf agent to a collection of empty chairs (cf. *The Chairs,* Ionesco, 1952). Long-appreciated human qualities, such as courage and perseverance, function no longer (cf. *Happy Days,* Beckett, 1961).

Ionesco's *Amedee* (1953) depends for its effectiveness on the central image of the growing corpse and the consequent horror generated in the mind of both Amedee and his wife. In *Rhinoceros* (1959), another play, the idea of surrender to dictatorship is depicted through the reversal of normal human situations and the poetic juxtaposition of people's alienation from each other. Even when the routine dialogues between friends or families are used, they are so pointed, exact and matter-of-fact that they reveal the horror of normal-looking situations. The scenes or dialogues may not lead the spectators to any philosophical conclusions about motives and characters, but they do highlight the essential nature of their contact. In *Waiting for Godot* (1952), the efforts of Vladimir and Estragon to establish communication by either abusing each other or waxing poetic about dead voices very well exemplify this point. The preciseness of exchanges between husband and wife is so grotesque in *The Birthday Party* (1958) that the dialogue, though comic, contains a withheld threat and makes spectators uneasy. Such situations recur, and almost every play is a new image through which the existential anguish is made manifest.

Eugene O'Neill, in his play *The Great God Brown* (1926), stated the human approach to life in terms of absurdist thought. In the prologue, Dion Anthony says [with a suffering bewilderment]:

> Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colors of earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid of love, I who love love? Why am I afraid, I who am not afraid? Why must

> I pretend to scorn in order to pity? Why must I hide myself in self-contempt in order to understand? Why must I be so ashamed of my strength, so proud of my weakness? Why must I live in a cage like a criminal, defying and hating, I who love peace and friendship?... Why was I born without a skin, ….Why the devil was I ever born at all?[17]

The use of exaggerated gestures, pantomime and clownery is a normal feature of absurd theatre. For emphasising the definite mood or set attitudes, the use of masks is recommended by most absurdist playwrights—Expressionists, Dadaists and Surrealists, which heightens the feeling that it is a make-believe world and also emphasises the essential difference between acting and real living. Genet's *The Balcony* (1956) and *The Black* (1960) depend much for their impact on the use of masks, which represent the double faces of the actors. Repeated hitching up of trousers, fumbling with laces, mechanical dozing off by the two homeless people in *Waiting for Godot*, or feeding bread to Choubert in *Victims of Duty* (1956) are examples of sheer clownery. Therefore, the tragic and the comic, the serious and the ridiculous, are simultaneously used in absurd plays. In pathetic scenes, an effort to be jocular, or in funny situations, concern for dignity or sincerity of feeling is always absurd. However, in a world where reason fails to find sense in what man does or feels, it is quite natural.

Basic instincts and motor responses of the individual become the source of misery (*Act Without Words,* 1957). Camus himself could see that what transcends is the ability to recognise and even exalt in the absurd (*The Outsider,* 1942) or the minimal consolation of stoicism (*Cross Purpose,* 1944). Camus came to feel that absurdity implied a world which appears to accept brutality as easily as it did individual acts of violence. From an examination of the nature of absurdity, Camus moved towards liberal humanism, having believed that at the end of the movement of absurdity and rebellion there remains compassion leading to love. To the absurd playwrights, it is axiomatic that the *Homo sapiens* leave in an entropic world in which communication is impossible; the illusion is preferred to reality. The individual has no genuine scope for actions. Hamm sits lame and blind in *Endgame,* 1958; Winnie is buried to the neck in the sand in *Happy Days*; Ionesco's protagonist in *The New Tenant*, 1953, is submerged beneath proliferating furniture. Individuals are shown as victims of their metaphysical situations. Logically, the plays abandon linear plots, plausible character development and rational language. It may be said that in contrast to Camus' work, the style of the absurdist playwrights directly reflects their subject.

It has been aptly observed that:

> The term 'absurd drama' applied by Esslin to dramatists as diverse as Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet, Arrabal and Simpson, is something of a blunt weapon. Esslin had a disturbing if understandable tendency to trace the origins of the Absurd in an incredible array of writers some of whom do not properly belong in a theatre which is convinced of the unbridgeable gulf between aspiration and fulfillment, the impossibility of communication or the futility of human relationships. In other words, he is not always completely scrupulous in distinguishing between style and content in his revised edition of the book, however he has shown a commendable desire to underline the deficiencies of a term which, while proving a useful means of approaching dramatists intent on forging new drama, was never intended as a substitute for stringent analysis of the work of individual writers.[18]

Absurd theatre reflects a time of palpable spiritual emptiness when the precariousness of human existence is felt intensely, especially when the atrocities of WWII ruthlessly meant to stub out, inter alia, human civilisation. The world looked and felt absurd—a frightening, unsettling place wherein life seemed to have lost all meaning. The French philosopher Albert Camus, credited with first using the word 'absurd', certainly had a marked role to play in the creation of this kind of theatre. It was from his *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), where he defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. His philosophy points to absurdity as an authentic state of life.

It was Martin Esslin who coined the term "theatre of the absurd" for the plays written mostly in the 1950s and 60s since the term 'absurd' indicates the dilemma faced in the later twentieth-century context of civilisation denoting an invariably bleak personal vision. Hieldesheimer, Güenter Grass (1927-2015) and Peter Weiss (1916–82) in Germany; Harold Pinter (1930–2008) and Tom Stoppard (1937–) in the United Kingdom; Slawomir Mrozek (1930–2013) in Poland; Václav Havel (1936–2011) in Czech; Edward Albee (1928–2016), Israel Horovitz (1939–2020) and Sam(uel) Shepard (1943–2017) in the US, Badal Sircar (1925–2011) and Girish Karnad (1938–2019) in India have tried inter alia to arrest in their work the absurdity of life. Many of the twentieth-century international literary creations in poetry, fiction, short stories, drama and also in various branches of fine arts depict a somewhat dark[19] view of life, stressing the absurdity of human existence and their experience of life and time. They share the view that humanity is out of kilter with the universe it inhabits. Its meaning is indecipherable and without purpose; humanity is bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened.

The origins of the theatre of the absurd are rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s. It is a French term and initially denoted the vanguard of a military or political set-up, applied since the nineteenth century to the group of literary figures and painters devoted to the idea of art as an experiment, as well as a revolt against tradition. It was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of World War II that showed the total impermanence of any human value, whatever shook the concept of the validity of any convention. It highlighted the precariousness of human life with its fundamental meaninglessness as well as arbitrariness. The trauma of living since 1945 under the hovering threat of nuclear annihilation also seems to have been an important factor behind the rise of the new theatre. Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* (1960) adopted this avant-gardist technique and integrated it with the absurdist vision of civilisation as it is today, the dead-end aspect of human values.

The theatre of the absurd also seems to have been a reaction to the disappearance of a religious dimension from contemporary life. The absurd theatre can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual to our age by making people aware of the ultimate realities of their condition, by instilling again the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primaeval anguish. The absurd theatre hopes to achieve this by shock, showing that existence has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there could be a mystical experience when confronting the limits of the human condition.

These new experimental ventures brought a distinct change to the Western dramatic milieu, with the playwrights showing a determination to arrive at new content by way of inventing a form that would have the capability to be theatrically effective, holding on to what their works needed to present on the stage with regard to the contemporary consciousness through a not-so-unfamiliar idiom. A new theatre culture surfaced. Gamini Salgado pertinently points out that: "Among many changes brought about by the First World War was a transformation in the economic organisation of the theater and its capacity to serve as a centre for the sort of serious drama which Shaw envisaged."[20] This technique emerged with regard to the tendency of a group of experimental playwrights around the late 1940s and early 1950s. These playwrights included the French Jean Tardieu (1903–95), the Irish Samuel Beckett (1906–89), the Caucasian Arthur Adamov (1907–70), the Romanian Eugène Ionesco (1909–94), the French Jean Genet (1910–89), and the Spanish playwright Fernando Arrabal Terán (1932–).

The two leading exponents of this type of drama in France were the poet, dramatist, essayist, professional actor cum theatre director Antoine

Marie Joseph Paul Artaud (1896–1948, known better as Antonin Artaud) and his close associate Roger Vitrac (1899–1952, "the ablest dramatist to emerge from Surrealism.")[21]. Artaud was a major figure of twentieth-century theatre and European avant-garde, whose theories and raw, surreal and transgressive themes significantly contributed to the development of twentieth-century experimental theatre. He conceptualised the theatre of cruelty movement and wrote experimental texts with themes of introspection, mysticism, drug use, unorthodox politics and his experiences with schizophrenia. On the other hand, Vitrac was responsible for the concept of an 'anti-literary' theatre. He coined the term theatre of cruelty in a series of manifestoes collected in 1938 as *Le Théâtre et son double* [*Theatre and its Double*]. The theatre of cruelty may be said to be: "a primitive ceremonial experience intended to liberate the human subconscious and reveal man to himself." (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Artaud wanted the rational theatre to be replaced by a more physical one to shock its spectators into full awareness of the horror of the human condition saturated in cruelty and violence. He had been one of the noted theoreticians and exponents of Surrealism[22] in drama, wherein the action proceeds through a series of savagely grotesque and absurd plastic images.

Such a theatre would cause the spectators to undergo an Aristotelian *Catharsis*[23] to experience stupefying irrational responses involving an awareness of the undiluted truth about the prevailing human situation. It is a different matter, though, that Artaud could not successfully put his theory into an applied theatrical practice to be tested on the stage. Some later directors, like Peter Brook, attempted to develop and test Artaud's tenets in such productions as *Marat/Sade: The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat* as performed by the inmates of the asylum of Charenton, which effectively portrayed a social microcosm. It has been very judiciously commented that: "The Brechtian *Epic* with the *Theatre of Cruelty*, has given us one impressive work which is a challenge for any director, the *Marat-Sade* play by Peter Weiss." "THEATRE of absurdity some call it, theatre of cruelty others, but if we must have a label then perhaps Peter Brook is closest in calling it 'the theatre of disturbance.'"[24] *Marat/Sade,* along with the play *Die Ermittlung* (1965, tr. 1966 as *The Investigation*), won international acclaim.

Vitrac presented his Surrealist play *Les Mystères de l'Amour* (a three-act, five-scene play) on June 1, 1927, along with Artaud's one-act play *Ventre Brûlé, ou La Mère Folle* [*Upset Stomach, or The Mad Mother*]. Esslin considers that the play has an affinity with "automatic writing",[25] having taken resort to sadistic fantasies, and observes that in this play:

> Sets are modelled on Surrealist paintings... Past, present and future merge in Dreamlike fashion, the actual and the potential are inextricably interwoven. Yet in this chaos there are passages of remarkable poetic power. At one point... the basic theme of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, the problem of language, is squarely faced. [26]

For example,

> PATRICE: Then make a theatre without words.
> THE AUTHOR: Your words make everything impossible...
> THE AUTHOR: But... have I ever wanted to do anything else?
> PATRICE: You have: you have put words of love into my mouth.
> THE AUTHOR: You ought to have spat them out.
> PATRICE: I tried, but they changed into shots of vertigo.
> THE AUTHOR: That is not my fault, *life is like that*."[27]

So, any provocative theme and technique approach to the human condition comes to the fold of the absurd theatre under the avant-gardist influence. At the opening of the VIII International Theatre Congress in Helsinki in 1959, Ionesco observed: "The avant-garde is a theatre vanguard, a small shock force of dramatists and sometimes directors followed at a certain distance by the main body of actors, playwrights and producers."[28]

The work of such playwrights, producers and performers expressed the belief that in a Godless world order, human existence is devoid of any meaning, sense or purpose. What happens consequently is that communication either breaks or bogs down. We do not connect between each other and one another. Pinter's plays *The Room* (1957) and *Mountain Language* (1988) grapple with this crucial issue of communication. Language appears to have failed in articulating the suppressed human concern, hinting at a verbal collapse that refers unambiguously to the linguistic impotence of our time to cope with or effectively signify the contemporary chaos and confusion in deciphering the text of existence. Structured arguments and logical constructions take us nowhere in their face value and give way to irrational verbiage, leading to the contraction of speech and a telling silence, as Beckett's minimal play *Breath* (1970)[29] reflects. The Jewish Czechoslovakian author Franz Kafka (1883–1924), writing in German,[30] chose to delineate the absurdity of modern life by means of grotesque imagery in a series of parable-like stories and novels. He never bothered to indicate that he tried to put up any deep philosophical theory in his aphorisms, yet posterity has recognised him as a pioneering existentialist literary artist. While Sartre considered Kafka an existentialist, Camus found in him an absurdist. Kafka's characters face alarmingly incomprehensible predicaments. This fragile youth represented an average

middle-class family from an ordinary Jewish suburban ghetto of Prague (the city then was a part of Bohemia, within the Austro-Hungarian Empire; now in Czechoslovakia). He is acclaimed as one of the twentieth century's major literary figures, whose prose creations exemplifying a 'dark wit' dazzlingly reflect the alienation and frustration of the time, of cruel and unjust treatment meted out to individuals.

In *The Metamorphosis* [*Die Verwandlung*] (1915), *The Judgment: A Story* [*Das Urteil: Eine Geschichte*] (1916), *The Trial* [*Der Prozess*] (1925), *The Castle* [*Das Schloss*] (1926), in his *Diaries* (vol.1:1910–13; vol.2:1914–23) and many more works, Kafka sought to sketch with simple cold words the absurdity of many of the structures erected by bizarre twentieth-century life. He focused on its domineering sense of guilt, of meaninglessness, of the struggle for an insignificant place in life underscored by a loss of, and urge for any spiritual quest. With his powerful pen, Kafka realistically sketched the fantastic events he found around him. His narrative art contained a force causing the reader to brush aside fantasy and accept the narrated event, marked though by absurdity/grotesqueries, yet recording, nevertheless, a depth of vision (almost the same 'Kafkaesque' result has been achieved by Ionesco in his late-twentieth-century absurdist plays). It has been quite perceptively commented that Kafka's works:

> Evoke the bewildering oppressiveness of modern life... his general perspective is inevitably one of an alienation. His characters constantly face failure and futility, and they struggle to survive in a world that is largely unfeeling and unfamiliar. This world, rendered with great detachment and detail, is one in which the fantastic is entirely normal, the irrational is rational, and the unreasonable seems reasonable. It is a bizarre, senselessly oppressive world in which characters endure between madness and despair... protagonists subject themselves to extraordinary torture contraptions, negotiate unfathomable bureaucratic mazes, and execute astounding transformations... today, with genocide, madness, and even impending doom seen as everyday possibilities, Kafka's voice sounds vital and prophetic. As Ernst Pawel wrote in *The Nightmare of Reason: A Biography of Franz Kafka,* Kafka articulates "the anguish of being human."[31]

Therefore, the avant-gardist technique adopted in Samuel Beckett's *En Attendant Godot*[32] Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes*[33], Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*[34], or Eugène Ionesco's *Le Rhinoceros*[35] is integrated with the absurdist vision: the patina of waste forming gradually on the surface of our civilisation with human values dumped into insignificance for the false sake of some meaningless pursuits. The works of these playwrights and their ilk

originate from the idea that in a Godless universe, human existence stands devoid of any meaning or purpose. As such, all our communication breaks down. The absurd plays share the view that humanity is dwelling in a universe with which it is out of tune. Life is sans purpose—bewildered, troubled, threatened. The trauma of World War II shattered human values, shook the very roots of tradition and convention, and brought home the precariousness of human life, its meaninglessness and sheer absurdity. That a nuclear holocaust may happen any moment fanned the flame of this new brand of theatre like Beckett's *Endgame* [*Fin de partie*] (1957).[36] This play has been considered a powerfully expressed dramatic metaphor of Bekett's negativism:

> Nothing happens in Endgame and that nothing is what matters. The author's feeling about nothing also matters, not because it is true or right but because it is a strongly formed attitude, a felt and expressed viewpoint... the yardsticks of dialectical materialism and moralism are equally out in appraising the play. Dialectical materialism could only say that Endgame is decadent. Moralism and theology would say that the play is sinful, since nothing damns the soul so much as despair of salvation. Neither yardstick could tell us that this hauntingly powerful work of the imagination is art.
>
> There remains in *Endgame* just the problem of communication.... the specific allegorical identity of these two protagonists (Hamm & Clov) does not really matter. We care more about the immediate stage reality, the end-of-the-world, end-of-the-party reality that they evoke. The sense of the work, the sense of impasse, doomsday, and existentialistic absurdity is far more real than any discourse can make the play.[37]

The term absurd is applied to many prose writings and dramatic pieces, invoking the sense that the human condition is essentially and inescapably *absurd,* to be represented only in the literary works which by themselves may be branded as absurd. The current absurdist movement emerged in France post WWII, as has already been said, clearly as a revolt against the traditional sense of culture, beliefs and literary ideas. Earlier tradition held that rational human beings live in an intelligible universe, being part of an ordered socio-moral structure, capable of displaying heroic dignity and decorum even in the face of defeat and death. Since death is both a construct as well as an ultimate reality, it encompasses many a configuration. Death smiles, gives out signals, looms large, overshadowing precarious human existence; thereby, it frightens, enrages, casts its impregnable net of mystery over human consciousness, causes transfiguration of self and soul, and finally crushes the individual circuit board of life once and for all at its sweet

will. It is quintessentially a passive formation, yet always an active agent, a potential present that has continued existing in the past, the present, and the future all combined. Death confirms non-being.

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement focused wholly on individual existence, underpinning freedom and choice. At the same time, it has let us see the chaos and confusion we are trying to hold together. The movement sought to describe our desire to make rational decisions in spite of our 'existing' in an irrational universe. Life could be without inherent meaning; it could also be without such a meaning as might be understood by us. Whatever that could be, yearning for logic, coherence, rationality, and immortality is essentially futile, forcing us to define our meaning if there is one. Until any such definition is effectively attained, life is meaningless. Thia sense prevailed as well in the past but had remained dormant. Through the tattered clothes of the late twentieth-century world order there has appeared this sense in the form of an epidemic. Elizabethan dramatist John Webster (1580–1634), who composed the Senecan revenge tragedies, having had concern for the skull beneath the skin, considered death to be the only reality, that life being nothing but a joke. For Webster: "Life a general mist of error... death a hideous storm of terror." [38]

Middle Eastern thinkers were no less philosophic than their European peers and showed a depth of understanding with regard to the issue of human existence. Omar Khayyam, adept in mathematical classifications of algebraic formulae,—(not to speak of René Descartes, 1596–1650, who came several years earlier and developed the techniques that made possible algebraic or analytic geometry)—is best known for his superb poetry, especially through the competent translation of Edward Fitzerald (translated severally by many across the globe), ruminated in his *Rubaiyat* on the essential fleetingness of life:

> Oh, come with old Khayyam, and leave the Wise
> To talk; one thing is certain, that life flies;
> One thing is certain, and the Rest is Lies;
> The Flower that once has blown forever dies.
>
> Alike for those who for Today prepare,
> And those that after a To-morrow stare,
> A Muezzi'n from the Tower of Darkness cries,
> Fools! Your Reward is neither Here nor There![39]

Khayyam's thoughts moved around the fleetingness of life with its delusory momentary joy, meditations on time, and the liberating effects of wine. He telescopes psychedelic experiences and the inebriated forgetfulness caused by the comforting warmth of plenty of drink—a means to simultaneously

escape from and approach surreptitiously the core of human existence. In the ultimate analysis, Khayyam arrives at his imperative to leave the mystery and conundrum of life alone because even if philosophy can sharpen consciousness, it is ridiculously powerless to *change* the countenance of existence – its *transience*. A fragile frame of existence remains:

> With them the Seed of Wisdom did I sow,
> And with my own hand labour'd it to grow:
> And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd –
> I came like Water, and like Wind I go.

Later in the twentieth century there came the terse enunciation of the human predicament by such modern thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. They, with others, became instrumental in creating a widespread tendency to view the human situation as an inevitable isolation in an alien universe devoid of any permanence, inherent value, or meaning. Since the philosophical movement of existentialism has diverse dimensions and is applied to various disciplines, the term can hardly be deciphered unambiguously. What may, however, be pointed out is that there runs a somewhat parallel theme with respect to virtually all existentialist playwrights. The stress on singular individual existence finds us inexorably passing through a *'nothingness'* towards a *'nothingness'* that ends in absolute annihilation, again a '*nothingness*', a 'non-being'. This concept runs through existentialism, highlighted by Sartre's seminal work *L'Etre et le néant* [*Being and nothingness*] (1943).[40] It stands up to be an error, logically, to assume that the matter of a grammatical sentence represents the name of a thing. Therefore, when 'nothingness' emanates out of a grammatical sentence structure, it also should not be taken either by itself as a thing or the name signifying something. Some thinkers also consider that the problem of why 'something' and not 'nothing' exists happens to be a metaphysical riddle, while some others consider the question as irrelevant.

The philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) is considered to be an analysis of the later twentieth-century predicament of recognising the absurdity of human life. The Greek legend tells of a man eternally condemned to roll a heavy boulder up a hill only to have it roll down again. Camus, a French novelist, philosopher, essayist and playwright, who was considered to be the moral conscience of his time, strove to address the isolation of the individual in an alien universe, the individual's estrangement from themselves, and the issues of evil along with the inescapable finality of death. Camus chose to define this basic absurdity with the following words:

> A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But on the other hand, in a universe that is suddenly divested of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile.... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.[41]

The twentieth-century essayist further explained:

> In certain hours of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their senseless pantomime, makes stupid everything around them. A man speaking on the telephone behind a glass partition – one cannot hear him, but observes his trivial gesturing. One asks oneself, why is he alive? This malaise in front of man's own humanity, this incalculable let down, when faced with the image of what we are, this "nausea"... is absurd.[42]

The essay sought to investigate the paradoxes of the human condition as the grounds for the absurd. He presented an analysis of the contemporary ordeal of recognising the basic: "paradoxes of the human condition as evidence of the absurd."[43]

Though people always want to live, Camus believes that it is useless to hope that this desire will dictate all his actions. However, Camus ruled out the idea of suicide as a viable solution to such a futile pointlessness. What Camus perceives is that we should know this *consciousness* of the *absurd* in terms of existence that will enable us to attain a personal identity and value. Camus' leaning towards existentialism may be traced back to the philosophical legacy of the nineteenth-century Danish religious philosopher, protestant theist, and precursor of modern existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)[44]. Having preferred the Socratic method of indirect communication, he insisted on the need for individual decisions and leaps of faith in the search for religious truth. He is considered the first existentialist thinker who formulated the aesthetic, ethical and religion-orientated modes of existence. His was a reaction against the tradition upheld by most philosophers since the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (the renowned disciple of Socrates, believed to have lived during 427–347 BCE). For these traditionalists, the highest ethical good is universal. The idealist belief has held that the perceptible world is an illusory shadow of some higher realm of transcendent ideas or forms. Kierkegaard considered:

> What is sad when one contemplates human life, that so many live out their lives in quite lostness... they live, as it were, away from themselves and vanish like shadows. Their immortal souls are blown