

Literary Antecedents of the Absurd

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Abstract

As is well-known the concept of the Absurd is an off-shoot of Existentialism which was born in the 19th century and reached almost global acceptability in the early 20th century thanks to the works of Kafka, Camus, Sartre and the Absurd playwrights like Beckett and Pinter. This paper tries to show that the Absurd had literary manifestations in earlier literatures also. This does not aim to be an exhaustive survey of “the tradition of the Absurd” as in Martin Esslin’s *The Theatre of the Absurd*. A unique feature of this paper is the linkage which it establishes between the Absurd and the Persian poet Omar Khayyam.

Literary Antecedents of the Absurd

Though Existentialism as a philosophical school emerged in the 19th century, the ideas it propagated were not totally unknown. They had manifested themselves in the literature of earlier periods. For instance in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus, once the mystery surrounding his birth stands fully revealed, blinds himself, crying out that he cursed the day when he was born. More relevantly, Hamlet in his celebrated soliloquy raises the overwhelming question: To be or not to be, and discusses the problem of suicide. He asks why man, when he suffers the “slings and arrows of an outrageous fortune” does not end his troubles by ending his life.

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
The pangs of dispriz’d love, the law’s delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?¹

Whereas Camus finds his answer in *joie de vivre*, Hamlet finds it within the Christian framework. The line of suicide is based on the assumption that there is an after-life and that it will be better than earthly existence. But unfortunately, there is no warrant for such an assumption. Hamlet continues his meditation on suicide

Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.²

In short, Hamlet’s answer is that though life is full of trials and tribulations, it is at least a known devil; but there is no knowing about life after death. Who knows it may be worse than this life! It is an unknown devil. And if the choice is between two devils, the known devil is always better than the unknown one. Similarly in the earlier speech-what a noble piece of work is man — Hamlet reduces this angelic creature, this paragon of all animals to “quintessence of dust”. Later on, almost at the end in the famous Grave-digger’s scene, Hamlet meditates further on the nothingness of man. Holding the court-jester Yorick’s skull in his hand, he

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wonders on the fate of such movers and shakers of the world as Alexander, the Great and Julius Caesar. He suggests very frighteningly that after the decomposition of their bodies, their dust must have got mixed up with other dust, which may have been picked up by some farmer or someone else. As a result, for all we know, Alexander is now guarding the cottage-wall of a farmer and Julius Caesar may be a stopper of some beer-barrel!

Beneath the almost clinical dispassionateness with which the Existentialists describe *La conditione humaine* one can discern an implicit note of discontent with things as they are. Certainly there is no joy, no exultation in the description. And this under-lying discontent may be linked up with, to borrow the famous phrase of Mario Praz, the Romantic Agony. In other words, the existentialist *angst* can be seen as a prolongation, a continuation in our times of the Romantic Agony. This agony is the result of the perception of two basic facts of our existence: 1) the fact of change (mutability) and 2) the fact of death (mortality). These twin spectres— mutability and mortality — have always haunted the human imagination, but with especial virulence since the Romantic Age.

In the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment, as it is known, the dominant world-view was a mechanistic one which looked at the universe as a pre-fabricated, perfect machine. Newton described the world as a great watch and God as the Great Watchmaker. The world was the perfect creation of a perfect God. Any imperfections or inconsistencies were interpreted as man's inability to understand ways of God or were covered up by taking recourse to the Original Sin in the case of a deist or to the corruptions of civilization in the case of a sentimentalist. It was inevitable that such a metaphysic should collapse by its own internal contradictions and so it did in the late 18th century.

Now questions which were earlier silenced ruthlessly began to be raised. Human existence had far too many discordant facts. It was asked, for instance, if God made the world, and that God is perfect, how does one account for the myriad unpleasant aspects like poverty, disease, pain, death transience of beauty and joy, ugliness and so on? Perhaps it is better to look at the problem this way: if God made the world, he must have been either in a hurry — for he made it in six days, as the *Bible* tells you — or he must be a bad engineer. Look at the world he has made. as Keats says memorably in “Ode to a Nightingale”

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And laden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes
Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow, 3

This is Romantic Agony in a nut-shell, for you. According to Keats, it is better to be a stone, that has “happy insensitivity” about these things. That is why he would like to fly away “into the forests dim” with the Nightingale and forget the “weariness, the fever and the fret” of life which the bird is blissfully unaware of. In a world, where “but to think is to be full of sorrow”, sensitivity is a curse. Wordsworth also says at one place that “consciousness is a disease of the matter”. Similarly Shelley in “A Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” complains as to why we do not have a rainbow every day

If these Romantic poets raise questions of an aesthetic nature, later poets like Hopkins and Hardy ask ethical questions. For instance, in his celebrated sonnet, “Thou Art, indeed, Just My Lord”, Hopkins asks his God, “Why do sinners' ways prosper?” Paraphrased into our world, Hopkins's question makes God answer as to why in his world, a Jesus is crucified, but malefactors like drunkards, criminals rule the roost? In *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, beneath the acceptance, there is a seething anger against the “justness” of the Lord in the death by water of five Franciscan nuns who had set sail on that ship in the service of the same Lord. At the end of his novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy reiterating the melancholy of Romantics, says that the lesson Elizabeth-Jane learnt was that “happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain.” Similarly in *Tess*, he comes out more indignantly against the traditional notion of divine omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence. When Tess is raped in the primeval forest called the Chase by Alex d'urberville, Hardy asks uncomfortable questions.

But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was the providence of her simple faith? Perhaps like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked.⁴

Hardy's poem “To an unborn Pauper child” comes closer to Paul Tillich's existential insight into the mystery of the unconsulted human birth. In this poem after cataloguing the “terrestrial chart” of woes and travails, he asks the unborn child, “wilt thou take life thus”? Though the answer is bound to be in the negative, the child has no choice. Hardy knows his words of warning will not reach the child and even if they could,

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Hardy most despairingly says “thou wilt thy ignorant entry make”. And so foolishly optimistic, so hypocritical are we that though not to be born is the best way-out, we congratulate the child on its birth, wish him all the best though, we know even nothing good is likely to come by.

Perhaps the closest parallel to the existentialist vision comes from an altogether different corner — the 11th century Persian poet Omar Khayyam, whose *Rubaiyat* was translated by Edward Fitzgerald in the 19th century. It would be both unfair and incorrect to regard Khayyam as the exponent of unbridled alcoholism as he is made out to be by the mass media. He was a deeply serious poet concerned with the nature of our existence and offered his strategy of dealing with it through his symbolic verse. The transience of both the power and the glory in the face eternal Time is one of the themes that he strikes earliest in the *Rubaiyat*, as the following verse shows —

Think, in this batter’d Caravansarai
Whose Doorways are alternate Night and Day
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his Hour or two, and went his way.⁵

In the very next stanza, while bringing out the nothingness of man he reaches Shakespearean heights. Hamlet-like, he cruelly brings out human impotence against the fact of death.

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshy’d gloried and drank deep
And Behram, that great Hunter— the Wild Ass
Stamps o’er his Head, and he lies fast asleep.⁶

In verses 29 and 30, Khayyam raises basic overwhelming questions answers to which are badly required and are sadly not available.

Into this universe and *Why* not knowing
Nor *Whence*, like water willy-nilly flowing
And out of it, as wind along the Waste,
I know not *Whither*, willy-nilly blowing
What, without asking, hither hurried *Whence*?
And, without asking, *Whither* hurried hence!
Oh, many a cup of this forbidden Wine
Must down the memory of that insolence! ⁷

From where have I come? Why am I here? Where do I go after death? Who made skies, the stars? What is beyond them? These might look like questions asked by a child as it lies with its parent on the terrace on a summer night, looking at the star-lit sky. But not only the hapless parent but even the Nobel-Prize laureate physicists like Sir Penrose or Stephen Hawking can answer these questions. And it goes without knowing whence, why we have come here and wither we go from here, no meaningful way of living our life can be found. This, in short, is Khayyam’s, existentialists’ and Kafka’s position in life. No body knows the answers and there is no point in seeking guidance anywhere or making appeals to Heavens. As Khayyam says,

And that inverted Bowl they call the sky
Where under crawling coop’d we live and die
Lift not your hands to It for help — for It
Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.⁸

Under the circumstances, all that one can do is to regard the world as a caravanserai where one is to stay for a while and go away God knows where. Wisdom, therefore, lies in not breaking one’s head about the whats and whys of existence through religion or philosophy, but in making merry while one’s stay here lasts.

Yesterday *This* Day’s Madness did prepare;
Tomorrow’s Silence, Triumph or Despair
Drink! For you know not whence you came, nor why
Drink! For you know not why you go nor where.⁹

“Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die”. This is Khayyam’s strategy of living in a condition of total agnosis which need not be understood literally. Do what pleases you, for that is all you can do. Thus just

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as Camus' Absurd Man rejoices in *joie de vivre*, Khayyam goes in for merriment under the cloud of unknowing. Whether in Camus or Khayyam, this kind of hedonism has a touch of desperation about it, where human laughter and tears at the absurdity of life get inextricably mixed up.

Notes and References

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