Showing, Telling, or Proselytizing the Absurd:
Dramatic Conventions in the Works of Albert Camus and Eugène Ionesco

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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According to film critic Henry A. Giroux, art of a given era “does more than entertain; it offers up subject positions, mobilizes desires, influences us unconsciously… and incorporates ideologies that represent the outcome of struggles marked by the historical realities of power and the deep anxieties of the times” (Giroux 585). Thus, theatrical performance often presents audience members with the opportunity to work out their contemporary anxieties a safe, imaginative space. Among these anxieties is the ever pervasive “ubi sunt”: the inevitable passing of life into death. Knowing that man lives in the face of an inevitable, unchangeable death, personifies what is referred to in the philosophical writing of Albert Camus as “the absurd.” These themes were pervasive in the Parisian theatrical scene post-World War II, most notably in two immigrant playwrights: Camus himself and Eugène Ionesco, two contemporaries whose works depict circumstances that are congruent with the philosophical concept of Absurdism. However, though their plotlines and shared philosophical notion of the Absurd are similar, their distinctions in theatrical convention determine for the audience whether their creative works come across to audience members as didactic (à la Camus) or merely expressive (à la Ionesco). This investigation aims to provide a philosophical foundation for the Absurd, trace its pervasiveness within the theatrical works of Camus (Caligula, The State of Siege) and Ionesco (Exit the King, Rhinoceros), and determine how their particular stylistic and cosmetic choices differentiate one from the other. How do minor changes like stage conventions dramatically impact whether a play treats a theme didactically or expressively?

Signature of Investigator ____Samantha E. Piede____ Date: __May 1, 2018__
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Introduction

According to film critic Henry A. Giroux, art of a given era “does more than entertain; it offers up subject positions, mobilizes desires, influences us unconsciously… and incorporates ideologies that represent the outcome of struggles marked by the historical realities of power and the deep anxieties of the times” (Giroux 585). Thus, theatrical performance often presents audience members with the opportunity to work out their contemporary anxieties in a safe, imaginative space. Among these anxieties is the ever pervasive “ubi sunt”: the inevitable passing of life into death. Knowing that man is destined to die, what implications are there for human life, and what we should do in the face of it? What does it mean to live justly, knowing that we are destined to die? These themes were pervasive in the Parisian theatrical scene post-World War II, most notably in two immigrant playwrights: Albert Camus and Eugène Ionesco. These contemporaries shared multiple similarities in biography and subject matter. Both immigrated to Paris during wartime, both studied philosophy in their undergraduate work, and both penned dramas that were compatible with the philosophical concept of Absurdism. As such, it is surprising that little scholarship has been devoted to a direct comparison.

Although Camus never commented specifically on Ionesco’s theatre, Ionesco retained affection for Camus. When asked in a 1963 interview about whether he had been influenced by The Myth of Sisyphus and The Stranger, Ionesco replied, “Camus? Perhaps. I esteem him very highly” (Schechner 167). In a 1971 interview with Claude Bonnefoy, when asked about the solitude of his recurring character, Bérenger, Ionesco would recommend, unsolicited, that Bonneofy read Camus in order to better understand the character: “Anyway, what I mean is… I think one should re-read Camus…” (119).
This points to a perceived connection, at least from Ionesco’s perspective, between his writing and some of Camus’ ideology.

Some scholars are, however, doubtful about this comparison. In his 1986 book, *The Existential and Its Exits*, Livio A.C. Dobrez investigates existential and absurdist themes in the works of Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter, and, while he devotes a great deal of scholarship to connecting Ionesco’s plays to the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre, he devotes little space to Camus. His comparative analysis takes up slightly over one page, which he justifies by declaiming, “In spite of Ionesco’s sympathy for Camus, it is worth noting in passing that this parallel is not much more profitable” (178). He adds, “If there is a similarity, it is misleading and largely explicable in terms of Camus’ dependence on the idea of angst for his theory of the Absurd” (178).

A glance at his references, however, renders this assertion dubious. Dobrez makes sweeping generalizations about Camus’ philosophy of the Absurd, yet he neglects to include even a single text written by Camus in his list of references. As such, it is unclear how Dobrez has come to the conclusion that the two are incompatible. Asserting that the two are highly incomparable ignores not only similarities in their relationships with death, but also the explicit subject matter of their theatrical works. Both Camus’ *Caligula* (1938) and Ionesco’s *Exit the King* (1962) feature a monarch devolving into insanity upon facing the reality of death. Both *State of Siege* (1948) and *Rhinoceros* (1960) revolve around the plight of a city plagued by a pandemic, one that, in each, represents totalitarian rule. As such, perhaps the assertion that there is no reasonable
comparison between Camus and Ionesco results from a lack of familiarity with the former’s work.

While Dobrez’s assertions about a lack of similarity are largely baseless, he is potentially correct if we compare their theatrical works in terms of style. Though their depictions of the philosophical notion of the Absurd, death anxiety, and ways to seek justice in an absurdist world are similar, their choices in theatrical convention are strikingly distinct, resulting in very different plays. Where Ionesco uses an abundance of imagery, sound, and physical movement throughout his plays, Camus relies heavily on dialogue. While these stylistic divergences are seemingly minor, they result in two plays with very similar philosophies and themes developing drastically different conclusions: one heavily didactic (Camus) and one heavily expressive (Ionesco).

This investigation aims to provide a philosophical foundation for the Absurd, trace its pervasiveness within the theatrical works of Camus (*Caligula*, *The State of Siege*) and Ionesco (*Exit the King*, *Rhinoceros*), and determine how their particular stylistic and cosmetic choices distinguish the plays as either expressive of the absurd or prescriptive of the absurd. How do minor changes like stage conventions dramatically impact whether a play treats a theme didactically or expressively?
Chapter 1

A Brief History of Existentialism

The Absurdism of Ionesco and Camus finds its roots in the history of existentialism, which, in turn, is a lengthy one. According to William V. Spanos, “The roots of existentialism extend deeply into western history, even beyond St. Augustine to the pre-Socratic philosophers and the author of the Book of Job” (Spanos 1). Many of the themes of this philosophical movement (freedom, isolation, the burden of choice) are timeless and can find their roots in literature and philosophy spanning decades. At its core, existentialism is an affirmation of human freedom and our desire to be self-determining. Existential sentiments, though, showed the sharpest and most organized resurgence during the 19th century as a pushback to advancements in scientific understanding and its related corollary: causal determinism.

Many historians credit the rise in determinism to the advent of Newtonian physics. The discovery of Newton’s laws of motion -- ones that, without exception, governed the patterns of the universe -- developed in the public a stronger notion of causality: “if we measure accurately enough, and understand the laws and forces of nature, then the future becomes predictable” (Feldman 70). Philosophers began to extrapolate these findings; if stars and planets were subject to cause and effect, why should humanity be any different? David Feldman, in his book *Chaos & Fractals: An Elementary Introduction*, expounds on this, stating, “If the universe really is deterministic, if the world is fundamentally material and the objects of the world obey fixed deterministic laws, then in a sense the future has already been written – it is an inevitable consequence of the way things are today. Nevertheless, we perceive that we as
individuals are capable of making real choices…” (70 – 71). This philosophical theory is known as determinism, which places humans, like the rest of the universe, as objects in service to forces beyond their control: psychology, biochemistry, a series of predetermined events. Ultimately, despite feeling as though one makes decisions independently, a determinist holds that this weighing of options will always result in a single, definite outcome.

Determinist philosophy blossomed during the first half of the nineteenth century, due in part to the works of determinist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. In On the Freedom of the Will, Schopenhauer draws direct parallels to Newtonian physics and uses the comparison of a billiard ball on a table to explain the causal nature of that belief:

“[A]s little as a ball on a billiard table can move before receiving an impact, so little can a man get up from his chair before being drawn or driven by a motive. But then his getting up is as necessary and inevitable as the rolling of a ball after the impact. And to expect that anyone will do something to which absolutely no interest impels them is the same as to expect that a piece of wood shall move toward me without being pulled by a string.” (Schopenhauer 11)

This idea is not without consequence. In believing in the world as a mathematical equation of causes and effects, of actions that are predicated upon motives, humanity’s future becomes limited. According to this worldview, one can experience the illusion of choice, but not the actuality; all of our experiences and struggles were the result of inevitability and a fixed set of circumstances. This robs an individual of any sense of agency, and each becomes merely a pawn of forces beyond his or her control.

Schopenhauer writes, “…determinism stands firm; for fifteen hundred years attempts to
undermine it have been made in vain. They have been urged by certain queer ideas which we know quite well, but dare not call entirely by their name. In consequence of it, however, the world becomes a puppet show worked by wires (motives) without its even being possible to see for whose amusement. If the piece has a plan, then a fate is the director; if it has no plan, blind necessity is the director.” (Schopenhauer 321)

The conception that humanity is merely pulled along through a series of inevitabilities at the hand of an external puppet master can be both demotivating and potentially sinister. If man is no longer viewed as responsible for his actions, many of our societal structures would be called into question. For example, Western systems of justice were, and are, predicated upon the belief that man may justly be punished or rehabilitated for crimes because he had the ability to choose his involvement.

Philosopher William James confronted this issue in his 1884 lecture, “The Dilemma of Determinism,” in which he discusses the moral consequences of believing in a deterministic universe and man as object, rather than subject. A world without choice is also one without tragedy or triumph, as it lacks any moral value. He uses the example of a domestic violence case in Brockton, in which a man shoots his wife five times and, to finish the job, smashes her skull with a rock. “We feel that,” he writes, “although a perfect mechanical fit to the rest of the universe, it is a bad moral fit, and that something else would really have been better in its place” (James 10). However, in a determinist world, this wish is illogical; regardless of moral inclinations, the murder is merely inevitable. Ergo, regretting or moralizing about the action is moot. James concludes, “Determinism, in denying that anything else can be in its stead, virtually defines the universe as a place in which what ought to be is impossible – in other words, as an
organism with whose constitution is afflicted with an incurable taint, an irredeemable flaw” (James 10).

It is against such sentiments that 19th century existentialist philosophers, most notably Søren Kierkegaard, revolted. According to philosopher A. C. Grayling, “What happened in the 19th century was that there was an emerging sense that science, which made the world look like a mechanism governed by natural laws, had drained any external or transcendent source of meaning or value of purpose from the universe…People need a reason for living and choosing the values they live.” (Bragg)

This period marks the first use of the term “existential” philosophically; Kierkegaard would use it to “denote thought concerning the problems of human existence” (At the Existentialist Café 17). Existentialist philosophers opposed determinism by placing emphasis on man’s subjective experience.

Kierkegaard scholar Jean Wahl synopsized the existentialist’s position as, “…the philosophy of existence is essentially the affirmation that existence has no essence” (qtd. in Lewis 15). Existentialism conceives of man as subject, rather than object. An object may be acted upon by outside forces, pushed and prodded into taking a particular action. However, a subject has agency: the ability to assert will over an object in order to propel it towards an outcome of the subject’s choosing, rather than passively accepting the direction of its prodding. Existentialists hold that this agency is unique to humanity because only humanity has the option for diversity in action and development. Thus, the position is often synopsized as “existence precedes essence”: one first exists, and through one’s choices, is fashioned.
In his essay “Dread as a Saving Experience by Means of Faith,” part of his collection *The Concept of Dread* (1844), Kierkegaard focuses on the sort of phenomena that James notes are illogical in accordance with determinism: impulses of choice and regret. Here, he focuses specifically on dread. In a deterministic world, as James points out, the presence of dread would be functionally useless, as dreading a future outcome is logically pointless unless that outcome is changeable. Unlike James, however, Kierkegaard points to the presence of dread as a sign of man’s freedom, as it provides the impulse to consider one’s options. He writes, “He who is educated in dread is educated by possibility, and only the man who is educated by possibility is educated in accordance with his infinity” (Kierkegaard 253). With dread, one is provided with options and the possibility to choose from alternatives. This would render moral situations like the one that James provides to be assessed: as righteous or sinful. With choice comes the option for both evaluation and deviation.

Drawing on his religious background as a devout Christian, Kierkegaard would use his conclusions about dread in conjunction with his faith. To Kierkegaard, faith in a deterministic universe does not render the same value as faith freely chosen; there is no solace in a faith of inevitability. Man can appreciate and understand his faith when he accepts that it is chosen freely, as agency comes with a greater responsibility to choose correctly. Kierkegaard cites Genesis, in which Adam disobeys God by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In this example, his responsibility was actualized by his ability to choose: “The infinite possibility of being able, awakened by the prohibiting, draws closer for the fact that this possibility indicates a possibility as its consequence” (41).
In the mid-20th century, after the close of two world wars, existentialism grew and flourished; “what had been a tendency became a flood” (Koyré 533). “Hardly a day goes by without my being asked what is existentialism,” wrote Gabriel Marcel in 1946, “Usually it is a society lady who asks for this information, but tomorrow it may be my char-woman or the ticket collector on the Metro” (qtd. in At the Existentialist Café 165).

The philosophy became not only popular during this period, but fashionable. The philosophy became associated with youth culture in Paris in the late 1940s, to the extent at which existential philosophers gained celebrity status: “By day, they hoped for a sighting of the legendary writers – Camus with his movie-star looks, De Beauvoir with her turban and attractively hooded eyes, and Sartre with his pipe, his dumpy form and his comb-over” (“Think big, be free” 1).

Historian Alexandre Koyré credits the rise of existentialism in France to several factors. Firstly, he notes that the public expressed a “rather widespread dissatisfaction with academic philosophy, even before the war” (534). Many Parisians were discontented with academic philosophy and its distance from the most pressing social problems of the day. This is apparent in the early writings of Wahl, who, in his essay “Heidegger and Kierkegaard: An Investigation into the Original Elements of Heidegger’s Philosophy” (1933) declared, “The more the human being sees himself in his existence, the more he will see his union with the reality of the world; he will live his being-in-the-world instead of putting it into question. To the acuity of his consciousness there will correspond the density of the representation – if the word ‘representation’ can still be applicable – that he will have of the world, or rather the density with which the world will present itself to him” (130).
Moreover, Koyré notes that many of the themes of existentialism, namely isolation, freedom, responsibility, and absurdity, resonated in a world that had recently experienced dissolution. He writes, “…the state of war brought about the ‘dissolution of the bourgeois-capitalistic world and of the desperate situation of the European middle classes, that, having lost not only their earthly belongings but even all hope to recover them, and thus confronted with the ‘nothingness’ of ruin, fall back, so to say, on their existence, [the] last piece of property of which they are still owners” (Koyré 536). In a world that had been ravaged by two world wars, “the assumption that humankind was on an unblocked path of perpetual and frustrated advancement became untenable, and the problem of nihilism became more of an urgent concern” (Marmysz 44).

It is in this world that philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the leading existentialists philosophers during this period, found a captive audience. Though major institutions that had professed higher meaning – belief in the state, belief in political progress, belief in divine intervention to counteract cruelty -- had, in wartime, been rendered untenable, humanity was not left entirely afloat. In a world plagued by nihilism, Sartre offered a solution to their desolation. He proposed a rejection of looking for meaning objectively in favor of seeking it subjectively. Jacques Guicharnaud, who spent time with both Sartre and Camus as a youth, having frequented the same Café de Flores in which they produced their writing, recalls, “Existentialism became for some of us the only possible bridge between our thoughtlessness, which our milieu had assiduously fostered, and our entering the world. Thanks to this ‘philosophy,’ and those who founded it in France or had adopted it, we became conscious of the position we occupied and of its possibilities” (138).
Sartre’s existentialism is best elucidated in “Existentialism is a Humanism,” a 1946 essay based on a lecture he had delivered at Club Maintenant the year previous. In it, Sartre aims to dispel the notion that existentialism’s conception of radical freedom leads to nihilism; rather, he believed that humanity was in a unique position to harness freedom and create meaning.

To illustrate how man differs from other objects and forms of life, Sartre uses the example of a paper-cutter. In its manufacturing, a paper-cutter has a pre-delineated purpose. Its essence, or purpose, is determined before its existence, or creation, based on its function; it is given a sharp edge and a handle because it will later be used to cut paper. Though some religions conceive a vision of man as the creation of a “superlative artisan” (Sartre 21), Sartre rejects that idea, indicating that a man has not been designed to have single, pre-delineated purpose. He serves many roles within his lifetime, none of which are primary to others, and he is given the freedom to select them for himself. Sartre writes, “If a man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it” (Sartre 21). (Here, Sartre parts ways with Kierkegaard to offer an atheistic concept of freedom.) The existentialist believes this quality of non-definition is unique to humanity due to its possession of free will. This will allows individuals to make choices and, in turn, create themselves. Sartre stresses that this also makes each person responsible for the choices they make; if they can choose freely, the consequences of their actions, positive or negative, must be accepted.
Though, by this theory, humanity has no predetermined essence, Sartre indicates that we create our essence over the course of our lives with each choice that we make. Once a choice exists in the past, it becomes cemented in the edifice of time. Thus, one’s essence is only complete upon one’s death, when choices are no longer available. Only at this point does each person’s essence become determinate and final. (“Existentialism is a Humanism”)

This not to say that humanity is without barriers to action. Sartre would also speak of “facticity,” which refers to the factual elements beyond human control. For example, the fact of a person’s birth is not within their power, nor are the circumstances (the fact that we are born as human instead of something else, the biological limits of that species, the time in which we are born, etc.). However, Sartre asserts that our freedom comes in our ability to explore within these parameters. The boundaries set, but not our actions within them. (Being and Nothingness 127- 132)

The premise of human agency, though simplistic in definition, carries with it a series of resulting corollaries. For instance, if one is able to choose freely, there is not a singular, common destiny to which one must succumb. Moreover, if one creates one’s own essence without a predetermined best course of action, this opens the possibility of one’s choices being objectively meaningless and only having subjective value. While this can be freeing, it can also be daunting, for man becomes fully responsible for what he becomes.

Many of the examples that Sartre used to convey human responsibility in “Existentialism is a Humanism” resonated with his contemporaries. For example, in the essay, he relates an encounter with a former student seeking guidance. The student
impleaded Sartre to advise him about joining the Free French; he was drawn to combat out of both a desire to avenge the death of his brother, who had been killed in a previous insurrection, and to fight against the Nazi soldiers. However, he was also the sole provider for his ailing mother. Which path should he choose? Sartre uses this example to illustrate man’s freedom in making this choice and how his choice helps to define him. If he chooses his mother, he will show that he prioritizes the safety of his family (a single familiar life) over the ideal of fighting for his country (many distant lives); if he chooses to fight, the reverse is true. Ultimately, though, the essence of the young man will be defined by his choice, so he must choose wisely. Sartre offers no preferable solution, instead leaving the final decision to the discretion of his readers: “You are free, so choose; in other words, invent” (Sartre 33). This situation would be a familiar one for many French youth, some of whom had faced similar dilemmas in their decision to join or abstain from the Free French. (At the Existentialist Café 7-9) (Sartre 30 -33)

Koyré places some of Sartre’s success and celebrity with his ability to anchor his philosophical ideas in these germane, concrete situations, particularly through the arts. This “has enabled him to translate his philosophy into literature – and literature has always played the most important part in French intellectual life – and to present his worldview and his analysis of man not only under the form of a highly technical, abstruse and difficult book [Being and Nothingness], but in that of very successful novels and plays” (Koyré 534). Because of its focus on the subjective experience, existentialism lends itself successfully to narrative texts. Many progenitors of existentialism in the mid-20th century used literature, poetry, and theatre as mechanisms to express their philosophy. This is seen notably in the novels of Simone de Beauvoir (All Men are
Mortal, The Mandarins) and the short stories of Miguel de Unamuno (“Saint Manuel the Good, Martyr”). The most prolific existential fiction, however, would be found in the theatre.

Existentialist plays are inherently focused on conveying truths of its philosophy. From the situations presented on stage and the way these situations resolve, the audience derives insights based on that outcome. Sartre’s paramour, and existentialist in her own right, Simone de Beauvoir found this approach common in many of his theatrical works. In her first American tour in 1947, she delivered a lecture entitled Existentialist Theatre at Wellesley College, in which she analyzed three primary existentialist works of theatre, two plays by Sartre (The Flies and No Exit) and one by his close friend and contemporary, Albert Camus (Caligula), in order to explain the structure and goals of existentialist theatre. Beauvoir asserts that the theatre is a natural setting for playwrights who hold that existence precedes essence. That is, a situation may be presented as it would occur in life, and only after stepping back and watching the events unfold may one find truth. In the lecture, she quoted Sartre himself on a theatre of existential freedom: “[The] heroes are freedoms caught in a trap like all of us. What are the ways out? Each character will be nothing but the choice of a way out and will equal no more than the chosen way out…” (qtd. in Gilbert 114). Beauvoir indicates that, based on the actions and consequences of the main characters, audience members can determine whether their behavior is to be glorified or condemned. Princeton’s Walter Kaufmann echoes this sentiment in his opening to Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre, “…could it be that at least some part of what the existentialists attempt to do is best done in art and not philosophy?” (Kaufman 49). By anchoring their ideas into concrete situations on which
man’s freedom may be applied, existentialism could be applied not only theoretically, but practically.

Though Beauvoir, and, in fact, many anthologists of existentialist literature, counted Camus among the best of these literary existentialists, this association was, in Camus’ eyes, misplaced. Although he admitted to some shared ground with Sartre’s conception of a free and abjectly meaningless world, he disavowed the association. In an interview in 1945 with *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, he would proclaim directly, “I am not an existentialist” and would describe the particular existentialist philosophers (namely, Kierkegaard) of committing “philosophical suicide” (Stone). Though Sartre and Camus would share a close, yet tumultuous friendship, culminating in a bitter falling out in 1952, they diverged on some crucial philosophical tenets, ones distinct enough to form a unique branching from existentialism: the absurd.
Chapter 2

Distinguishing Camus’ Absurdity

According to historian Sarah Bakewell, Albert Camus “grew up in a world of silence and absences. His family had no electricity, no running water, no newspapers, no books, no radio, few visitors at home, and no sense of the wider ‘life-worlds’ of others” (147). Born in 1913, Camus would have less than one year with his father before he was recruited to the Algerien regiment and died on the battlefield. His mother, who was both illiterate and deaf in one ear, could only find work as a housekeeper and used her meager earnings to support herself, the young Camus, his brother Lucien, and her aging mother. Camus would transcend poverty through education, enrolling in the Lycée Bugeaud at nineteen and, later, the University of Algiers. Although, upon graduation, he had ambitions to become a professor, he was struck with tuberculosis, requiring him to postpone those plans indefinitely. Camus would take up a series of odd jobs to keep himself financially secure, including political organizer, actor, and, in 1937, journalist. (Rhein xi)

During his time on staff at the independent newspaper, the Alger republicain, Camus was tasked with taking on a column entitled “The Reading Room,” in which he reviewed recently published French-language literature (Zaretsky 16). Among these was Sartre’s Nausea, which he reviewed in 1938, declaring that the text “moves with a ‘vigor and certainty’ reminiscent of Kafka” (Aronson 12). He praised the work as:

“… the first novel from a writer from whom everything may be expected. So natural a suppleness in staying on the far boundaries of conscious thought, so painful a lucidity, are indications of limitless gifts. These are grounds for
welcoming *Nausea* as the first summons of an original and vigorous mind whose lessons and works to come we are impatient to see.” (qtd. in Aronson 12)

Though the two would not meet in person until the premiere of Sartre’s *The Flies* in 1943, Camus would relay in a letter to one of his girlfriends, Lucette Meurer, that Sartre’s *Nausea* remained “very close to a part of [him]” (qtd. in Aronson 11), and he would continue producing reviews for the *Alger républicain* of Sartre’s literary works, including *The Wall* in 1939. As such, it is unsurprising that Camus would make explicit allusions to Sartre’s body of work in his 1942 philosophical text, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in characterizing his notion of the ‘absurd’: “This discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this ‘nausea,’ as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd” (*Myth of Sisyphus* 6). Despite this claim, though, that *Naussea* was representative of the absurd, Sartre and Camus would remain divided on this idea throughout the course of their friendship and even after it had dissolved.

What is this notion of “the absurd” upon which they conflicted? Camus describes it as a state of “weariness tinged with amazement” (*Myth of Sisyphus* 5) which evolves out of a state of contemplation. Thoughts of the absurd often elude us due to what Camus calls “a mechanical life.” When we are engaged in a state of constant physical activity -- work, eating, entertaining, sleeping -- we often fail to question ourselves about why we do what we do. However, “one day, the ‘why’ arises, and everything begins…” When we are forced to examine our motives and justifications for how we live, we are, as Camus points out, rapt to discover some contradictions. This is the nature of the absurd. (*Myth of Sisyphus* 5)
Camus indicates that absurdity is the result of a paradox between the human mind and the living world. The human mind is, he explains, programmed for reason and a desire to seek order. We observe the world and use the faculties of reason to draw conclusions about how it operates. He calls this desire the “nostalgia for unity” (Myth of Sisyphus 6). Humans seek to reconcile all of their observations with one another and come to a definite “truth.” He writes, “That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama. But the fact of that nostalgia’s existence does not imply that it is to be immediately satisfied” (Myth of Sisyphus 6). However, despite the human mind’s capacity and desire to make sense of the world, Camus notes that some naturally occurring phenomena defy logic and, when combined, create absurdity.

Camus indicates that the absurd is a comparative term. He illustrates this with an example: “If I accuse an innocent man of a monstrous crime, if I tell a virtuous man that he has coveted his own sister, he will reply that this is absurd… The virtuous man illustrates by that reply the definitive antinomy existing between the deed I am attributing to him and his lifelong principles. ‘It’s absurd’ means ‘It’s impossible,’ but also ‘It’s contradictory’” (Myth of Sisyphus 10). Thus, Camus believes the character of the absurd lies in that antinomy: a naturally occurring paradox. A situation becomes ‘absurd’ when two elements clash with one another. Camus further characterizes this with an example of a man defending himself against a machine gun assault with a sword. While neither the existence of a man using a sword nor the use of machine guns are absurd in and of themselves, their placement together creates an absurd situation through their disproportion. Thus, the absurd “bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a
certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it” (Myth of Sisyphus, 10).

The contradiction on which The Myth of Sisyphus hinges is echoed in his play, Caligula: “Men die, and they are not happy” (Caligula 8). The proof of human death is not a point that Camus spends much time discussing, quipping that it has been “I am limiting myself here to making a rapid classification and to pointing out these obvious themes. They run through all literatures and all philosophies. Everyday conversation feeds on them. There is no question of reinventing them” (Myth of Sisyphus 6). Regardless, this fact does carry with it some interesting corollaries and problems that create absurdity.

Camus draws parallels between the fact of human death and the Greek myth that inspired the essays’ title. The Myth of Sisyphus refers to Sisyphus, king of Corinth, who was often at odds with the gods, having “stolen their secrets” by revealing to the father of the abducted Aegina how to retrieve her from Zeus. Additionally, he had managed to temporarily cheat his own death by ensnaring Hades in a pair of handcuffs under the guise of teaching him how they worked. According to the myth, as punishment, he is tasked with an eternity of hard labor. Every day, he is doomed to roll a massive boulder up a steep hill, and, every day, the boulder will roll back down again. This creates an enduring loop, rendering his efforts futile. (Myth of Sisyphus 23 – 24)

Camus establishes that, like Sisyphus’ efforts with the boulder, any attempts humans make to develop their minds or bodies are ultimately also rendered futile. The fact of death renders all goal-oriented behavior ultimately meaningless; though it may sustain one in the moment, the goal dies with the person. Why sustain a body that is
meant to die? Is there something about living that is objectively preferable to dying?
Individuals spend their lives attempting to grow, learn, and contribute to the world, only
to lose all of this in the face of death. Thus, human life itself is paradoxical and absurd.

Camus writes, “And carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion, I must admit that
the struggle implies a total absence of hope…, a continual rejection…, and a conscious
dissatisfaction” (Myth of Sisyphus 11). Here, he describes the state of nihilism and its
resulting existential angst: the world is, in his eyes, devoid of meaning and reason, which
is painfully at odds with the human desire to create purposefully. Thus, throughout the
essay, Camus aims to determine what the logical conclusion is to being faced with an
absurd existence: “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the
fundamental question of philosophy” (Myth of Sisyphus 1).

The knowledge of one’s death, combined with a lack of knowledge of what
occurs afterward, creates an unsettling anxiety, or angst. Angst results directly from
one’s ability to make choices: to select one outcome over another; this parallels Sartre’s
own theories of responsibility for one’s choices. So, knowing that we will die, are there
choices that are preferable to others?

One of the options discussed in the essay is that humans can adopt a transcendent
view of the universe that goes beyond human understanding; one could create and sustain
a metaphysical explanation for the universe, often a theistic one. This option is
unacceptable to Camus. In his journals, Camus would write, “I do not believe in God,
and I am not an atheist” (Notebooks: 1951-1959), and he would notoriously lambast firm
religious beliefs on the grounds that all religious claims are metaphysical and claim to
have knowledge of a world beyond the senses. Camus critiques, and lampoons, several
Christian existentialist philosophers who use absurdity to create dogma that reconciles the absurd, most devastatingly Søren Kierkegaard. Camus is very critical of Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Dread*, in which he applies the concepts of freedom and dread to religious devotion. He notes that the concept of the absurd can be seen in Kierkegaard’s explication of dread: that the possession of dread in a world where outcomes are not changeable would qualify as an absurd circumstance. However, Kierkegaard had argued that it was a sign that humanity should undergo “the sacrifice of the intellect” and take a leap of faith that paradoxes such as this could only be understood in the eyes of God. Camus rejected that conclusion on the basis that it is still speculative, stating that Kierkegaard merely “wants to be cured” of the absurdity, so he invented a religious reason to placate his intellect. “But this ‘therefore’ is superfluous,” he writes. “There is no logical certainty here. There is no experimental probability either” (14). He states, “I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone. I am told again that here the intelligence must sacrifice its pride and the reason bow down. But if I recognize the limits of the reason, I do not therefore negate it, recognizing its relative powers” (*Myth of Sisyphus* 14). Camus also rejects suicide, on the grounds that it is merely expediting the inevitable. It does not solve the issue of the absurd, but, rather, is “acceptance in the extreme” (19). Rather than attempt to resolve the angst created by the absurd, suicide dives directly into it.

What, then, is preferable? Rather than create a structure to explain away the absurd or expedite an already inevitable death, Camus recommends confrontation, or what he calls “revolt.” The act of revolt requires us to acknowledge our ephemerality and persist in spite of it. He clarifies, “It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope” (19).
Rather than attempt to find a true meaning to life, he advocates that we merely stop expecting to find one. He writes, “That revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life. To a man devoid of blinders, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it” (19).

In doing so, we are granted freedom of action by no longer being bound to a singular, preferable outcome. Camus clarifies that, unlike determinists or true existentialists, he is not aiming to establish a position on what can be known about the true nature of the universe; the realm of metaphysics fails to interest Camus due to the fact that all positions are equally unsubstantiated. “The only one I know,” he writes, “is freedom of thought and action” (*Myth of Sisyphus* 19). If there is no meaning, then there is no reason why one action is preferable to another. This allows us the freedom to follow our passions. While we cannot guarantee an overarching meaning, we can still experience the pleasure of the experiences themselves. This harkens back to some of Camus’ earlier essays in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* (1937) and *Nuptuals* (1938), in which he discussed the joy of sensory experiences:

“At the moment, my whole kingdom is of this world. This sun and these shadows, this warmth and this cold rising from the depths of the air: why wonder if something is dying or if men suffer, since everything is written on this window where the sun sheds its plenty as a greeting to my pity? I can say and in a moment I shall say that what counts is to be human and simple. No, what counts is to be true, and then everything fits in, humanity and simplicity. When am I truer than when I am the world?” (*Lyrical and Critical Essays* 60).
In *Sisyphus*, Camus uses multiple examples of revolt in the face of the absurd, most of whom also find their value in the sensory realm. This is seen most notably in the inclusion of the fictional libertine, Don Juan, whose legend revolves around his sensual encounters with multiple different women. He also extends this value to Sisyphus himself, indicating that, even in his imprisonment, he can derive satisfaction from rejecting the notion of purpose and thus being able to continue his sensory experiences:

“But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (*Myth of Sisyphus* 24).

Due to their mutual assertions of freedom, emphasis on living an authentic life, and rejection of objective meaning, it is unsurprising that many scholars have mistakenly represented Camus’ and Sartre’s conclusions as interchangeable. After all, in addition to their similarities in subject, the two remained close companions for almost a decade after meeting in 1943, parting after bitter falling out in 1952 over a multitude of disagreements, some ideological (Sartre’s support of Communist dictators in the name of a Marxist ideal vs. Camus’ unyielding commitment to nonviolence), some romantic (Camus’ rejection of Simone de Beauvoir’s advances, which offended Sartre, her long-time paramour), and some literary (*Les Temps Modernes*’ scathing review of Camus’ "Nietzsche and Nihilism") (Bakewell; Aronson). However, even before their public
quarrel, the two men diverged in ways that make some of their philosophical ideals incompatible with one another.

Like Sartre and Kierkegaard, Camus anchors many of his conclusions in the assertion that man experiences freedom of action. However, he avoids a hard estimation about whether this state is *a priori*, stating bluntly, “Knowing whether or not man is free doesn’t interest me” (*Myth of Sisyphus* 19). This declaration was unfavorable to Sartre, who believed that an *a priori* position on freedom of the will was required in order for any ideas about man’s *experience of* freedom to carry any weight; otherwise, those ideas lacked any framework for understanding. In his review, Sartre makes a particularly cutting comment to this end, stating, “Camus shows off a bit by quoting passages from Jaspers, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, whom, by the way, he does not always seem to have quite understood” (*An Explication* 109). The acerbity of that particular remark would sit poorly with Camus, to the extent that he would complain about the critique in a letter to his former professor of philosophy, Jean Grenier: “…in criticism this is the rule of the game, which is fine because on several points he enlightened me about what I wanted to do. I also see that most of his criticisms are fair, but why that acid tone?” (qtd. in Aronson 150)

Moreover, while Sartre’s conception of free will rejected *objective* meaning, it did not reject meaning entirely. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre argues that individuals define themselves, and all of humanity, through every choice, “there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. Choosing this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil” (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 24). This
thereby instills each action with meaning; each action’s meaning defines what the individual believes humanity should be. According to Bakwell, Sartre’s conception of freedom is “a person who is engaged in doing something purposeful, in the full confidence that it means something” (152).

This notion of commitment is explicitly missing from Camus’ *Sisyphus*; in fact, in his notebooks, he would declare himself “against the literature of commitment” (qtd. in Aronson 83). Though he would later develop and expound on his belief in a “common good” in his 1951 essay, *The Rebel*, his Sisypbian conception of the absurd in 1942 would hinge on his declaration that “belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary” (21). Camus’ concept of the absurd leaves open the possibility of a loss of moral value. Humans can describe events in their lives in terms of emotions, but, given that there is no intended outcome, each position is potentially morally interchangeable. As such, the life of commitment may cause a narrowing in focus that prevents one from fully experiencing each moment and rejects the absurd; such behavior wishes for a world on one’s own terms, rather than the reality of the world one is given.

In his review of *The Stranger*, Sartre would describe Camus’ position as: “Since God does not exist and man dies, everything is permissible. One experience is as good as another; the important thing is simply to acquire as many as possible. The ideal of the absurd man is the present and the succession of present moments before an ever-conscious spirit…For this man, everything is lawful” (*An Explication* 111). He would critique this notion further, stating that Camus was “slyly filtering out all the meaningful connections which are also part of the experience” (qtd. in Bakewell 152).
Throughout his life, Camus would insist that his interest in defining the absurd was less to create a philosophical maxim and more to describe an experience, which he expressed as preferable for his purposes: “The fact that certain great novelists have chosen to write in terms of images rather than of arguments reveals a great deal about a certain kind of thinking common to them all, a conviction of the futility of all explanatory principles and of the instructive message of sensory impressions” (qtd. in An Explication 111 - 112). As such, it is only fitting that many of his philosophical contributions would take the form of theatrical performances.

Albert Camus had a lifelong fondness for the theatre. When asked about this in a television interview, he replied quite simply that he “was happy there” (Rhein 42). In 1935, prior to his own career as a playwright, he was the founder of, and an active troupe member in, the Algerian Théâtre du Travail, where he gained experience both on stage and behind the scenes. This experience would later serve as an icebreaker for his relationship with Sartre and result in an invitation to play Garcin in a performance of Sartre’s No Exit. Performance, however, was not Camus’ greatest strength; he would bow out of the production when Sartre’s financial backer fell through, citing the need for the production to appear more professional (Aronson 10). In following years, he would confine himself to writing and directing, eschewing the stage lights.

Camus’ playwriting repertoire, which consists of five original productions and several adaptations of other authors’ work, follows a very particular pattern. Consistently, he “uses the theater as a medium for serious statements about human life” (Rhein 42). Like his essays, each play contains elements from his philosophy of absurdism and revolt, realized on stage in concrete situations. Much like Beauvoir’s
assertions about existential theatre, Sartre would say of Camus’ theatre and literature that “the absurd man does not explain; he describes” (An Explication 111).

At the time of his performances, Camus’ absurd man was in good theatrical company. This theme of absurdity, and its resulting conclusions of angst, revolt, and freedom, would appear in more contemporary theatrical works than just his own.

According to film critic Henry A. Giroux, art of a given era “does more than entertain; it offers up subject positions, mobilizes desires, influences us unconsciously… and incorporates ideologies that represent the outcome of struggles marked by the historical realities of power and the deep anxieties of the times” (Giroux 585). In the mid-20th century, beginning towards the end of World War II, the Parisian theatre scene began to populate with works that featured a common theme: man’s experience in the face of an absurdist world. Many of the productions during this period also sported a new avant-garde style: minimalist sets, scripts that deviate from the structure of the Aristotelian “well made play,” and highly physical movements, bordering on violence. This proliferation of abstract, philosophical, and highly stylized plays would later be termed “The Theatre of the Absurd” by dramatist Martin Esslin, a term which would solidify in theatrical history. Esslin clarifies that the playwrights in this school were likely not aiming to conform to a similar pattern, but, rather, “to express no more and no less than his own personal vision of the world” (Absurd Drama 7).

Multiple theories exist as to why this theme and style would have proliferated in the theatre of post-war Paris specifically, though none are conclusive. Esslin hypothesizes that it may be the result of the city’s “highly intelligent theatre-going public, which is receptive, thoughtful, and as able as it is eager to absorb new ideas” (27), as well as a
national shattering of the world’s faith in “progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies” (23). Many theatrical historians, including Esslin, William R. Mueller, and Josephine Jacobson, credit Camus with merely with “diagnosing the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs” (Esslin 23).

Though few scholars have devoted time to their juxtaposition, the contemporary who expressed the most similar themes in his theatrical work was not Jean-Paul Sartre, but one of the defining playwrights of this new theatrical movement: Romanian-born playwright Eugène Ionesco. Not only did the two share an assortment of biographical similarities (both immigrants to Paris, both staunch supporters of nonviolence), but the subjects of their works overlapped significantly. Not only did both feature commentary on the absurd, but they did so using strikingly similar metaphors: a monarch confronted with his own mortality (Caligula, Exit the King) and a biological affliction that threatens man’s freedom (State of Siege, Rhinoceros). However, despite their similarities in content, the two playwrights diverge significantly on theatrical convention and style, resulting in significantly different outcomes for the audience. As a result, the stage conventions used by Camus create a didactic theatrical experience, whereas Ionesco’s choices result in a production that is expressive.
Chapter 3

The Absurd in the Face of Death: Camus’ *Caligula*

Of all of Camus’ plays, his earliest, *Caligula*, most closely mirrors his absurdist philosophy. Drama critic Robert Kemp, who reviewed the original production of Camus’ *Caligula*, attested to the connection between Camus’ philosophy and the play in his review, stating, “When I listen to *Caligula*, I can’t stop thinking about Albert Camus… I never wonder: What is Caligula going to do? What are Cherea and Scipio thinking of? – but: what does M. Camus want to say?” (qtd in Sonnenfeld 111) The play was written in 1938, though it was not staged publicly for another seven years, making both versions relatively contemporaneous with *The Myth of Sisyphus* and his novel *The Stranger*, both of which were published in 1942. Though separate forms (play, essay, and novel) Camus considered these works to be companion pieces and would refer to them collectively as his “three absurds” because they shared a common theme of “the meaninglessness or absurdity of human existence” (Bakewell 138).

In 1957, in the preface to a collection of his original plays, Camus admitted that the inspiration for the trilogy came from “concerns that were [his] at that moment,” so much so that he had originally conceived taking on the role of the titular character when he first wrote the piece. Fortunately for the theatrical world, much like his departure from *No Exit*, Camus reveals that the postponed production was a blessing and that the war “forced modesty on [him],” and he allowed the role to go to a more experienced actor when it was finally staged at the Théâtre Hébertot in 1945. (“Author’s Preface” v)

*Caligula* is a fictionalized account of the titular 1st Century Roman emperor’s rule, one that gained historical notoriety for his scandalous and possibly mad public
behavior. For inspiration, Camus pulled from the accounts of Roman historian and imperial secretary Suetonius. In his histories, Suetonius notes that, during his reign, Caligula was accused of a multitude of heinous and nonsensical acts, including murdering citizens for sport, philandering with his patricians’ wives, and ordering his army to collect all of the sea shells on the beaches of Brittania (Woods 47). Camus’ play takes these accounts and frames them within the context of the playwright’s own philosophical concerns: man confronting death and, in turn, the absurd.

The use of a classical figure in order to unpack absurdist or existential themes follows a similar method employed by his contemporary, Sartre. In his first play (Les Mouches, or The Flies), also first conceived in 1938, Sartre too selected a classic work, the Oresteia, whose plotline would be familiar to his contemporary audience, and used the play’s dialogue to morph it into a vehicle for his existential philosophy (Gilbert 112). On his own work, Sartre would write, “If it's true that man is free in a given situation and that in and through that situation he chooses what he will be, then what we have to show in the theater are simple and human situations and free individuals in these situations choosing what they will be…” (Sartre on Theater 4-5). Through watching the actions of Sartre’s Orestes, whom he stages as his existential hero, audience members gain insight into which actions and motivations Sartre deems philosophically valuable. Based on the success or failure, the audience will come away with an instruction manual for how to approach their own lives. In his commentary on theatre, Sartre would write, “. . the most moving thing that the theatre can show is a character in the process of being formed - the moment of choice, of free decision that engages a morality and a whole life” (qtd. in Gillespie 52).
Scholar Phillip Rhein finds a similar vein in Camus, stating, “Camus uses the theater as a medium for serious statements about human life” (42). Camus’ didacticism, though, takes on a different flavor than Sartre’s. While Sartre’s Orestes concludes his story alive and affirming his freedom, most of Camus’ protagonists fail to survive the events of the play, leading the audience to learn through their failure, rather than their success. In this case, it is due to Caligula’s hedonistic nihilism that he ultimately perishes.

In the play, Caligula’s descent into depravity is prefaced by the death of his sister Druscilla, with whom he had an intimate, possibly sexual, relationship. The loss has left Caligula noticeably changed, and, in the opening scene, several of the Roman patricians speculate on his emotional health:

THE OLD PATRICIAN: “When I saw him leaving the palace, I noticed a queer look in his eyes.”
FIRST PATRICIAN: “Yes, so did I. In fact, I asked him what was amiss.”
SECOND PATRICIAN: “Did he answer?”
FIRST PATRICIAN: “One word: ‘Nothing’.” (Caligula 3)

Though the patricians brush off the verbiage of this exchange as an attempt to dismiss their concerns, the word “nothing” in this context carries more sinister overtones. Caligula’s response is indicative of his descent into the darker elements of the absurd. The reality of Druscilla’s death has served as a catalyst to drive Caligula to the edge of nihilism. Scipio, a poet of the court, describes his interactions with Druscilla’s corpse in a way that suggests that Caligula has undergone a mental transformation: “He went up to
Druscilla’s body. He stroked it with two fingers and seemed lost in thought for a long while. Then, he swung around and walked out, calmly enough…” (Caligula 5).

When Caligula finally emerges from his solitude and enters into the palace gardens, his colleagues report that they find him noticeably changed, physically and psychologically. The stage directions describes him as having “legs caked with mud; his garments dirty; his hair is wet, his look distraught” (Caligula 7). When his companion Helicon inquires as to what he has been doing, Caligula explains that he has been searching for a way to obtain the moon. Quickly, though, he asserts that the moon is merely a symbol for something he cannot quite attain, equal to “happiness or eternal life - - something, in fact that may sound crazy, but which isn’t of this world” (Caligula 8).

Here, he is faced with the same situation as Camus’ other existential protagonists: the absurdity of man’s existence in the face of death. He searches for the moon, an object so large and distant that he will never be able to attain it; the desire itself is absurd. When Helicon questions him on this and whether it relates to his sister’s death, Caligula denies that his thoughts come from grief. Rather, the death was “no more than a symbol of truth that makes the moon essential to me” (8). The death itself is not the problem; it is merely a reminder of a larger issue: that the world will fail to give him anything of objective, permanent value. With the world rendered unsatisfactory, Caligula resolves use his power as the emperor to shape a world of his choosing: “I shall make this age of ours a kingly gift – the gift of equality” (17). With objective value negated, he will aim to pull everything into that of equal worth: that is to say, no worth at all.

Throughout the play, Caligula engages in cold logical proofs, in which he takes a premise that he accepts as true and follows it to its logical, and often horrifying,
conclusions. For example, in speaking with his intendant about the value of the treasury, he offers the following proof for examination:

“If the Treasury has paramount importance, human life has none. That should be obvious to you. People who think like you are bound to admit the logic of my edict, and since money is the only thing that counts, should set no value on their lives or anyone else’s.” (*Caligula* 12-13).

Though the intendant indicates the he considers his masters’ conclusions cruel, he is incapable of refuting Caligula’s argument. Caligula’s assertion is logically sound; if the premise that the Treasury has *paramount* importance is correct, then it cogently follows that all other aspects of the world are worth less. “I have resolved to be logical,” Caligula proclaims, “and I have the power to enforce my will. Presently you’ll see what logic is going to cost you? I shall eliminate contradictions and contradicters” (13).

The theme of cold logic pervades much of this play and echoes a similar style to Camus’ *Sisyphus*. Those familiar with both texts may note that the progression of Caligula’s logical proofs are reminiscent of Camus’ discussions of suicide, in which he rejects sentimentality in his arguments: “Shades of meaning, contradictions, the psychology that an ‘objective’ mind can always introduce into all problems have no place in this pursuit and this passion. It calls simply for an unjust — in other words, logical — thought” (*Myth of Sisyphus* 3). Just as Camus approaches the value of suicide clinically and dismisses any arguments beyond what he can rationalize within his immediate circumstances, so too does Caligula. He refuses any sentimental arguments about why he should prioritize anything his life – his subjects, his resources, his lover – over anything else. He aims for equality, which, in his case, means an equal chance at disposal.
Camus peppers the play’s dialogue with these proofs. One example of this comes in Helicon’s readings of one of Caligula’s destructive execution proclamations:

HELICON: “Execution relieves and liberates. It is a universal, tonic, just in precept as in practice. A man dies because he is guilty. A man is guilty because he is one of Caligula’s subjects. Now all men are Caligula’s subjects. Ergo, all men are guilty and shall die. It is only a matter of time and patience.” (29)

Caligula aims to establish logic as a basis for absurdity. With each proof, he reaffirms his belief in the absurdity of existence and provides a foundation for its corollary conclusion: if life is absurd and without meaning, his own actions, just or cruel, bear little weight. Thus, he embraces a life of extreme freedom.

Caligula does not merely proclaim nihilism and absurdity in the face of death; he lives it. He engages in acts that, to the average person, would be considered both cruel and bizarre, such as closing public granaries with the intent of starving his people for his own amusement, declaring, “Famine begins tomorrow” (28). Through his logic, dismissing morality is a valid conclusion in an absurd world. In a world without value, all acts, including starvation of his people, are permissible.

Another of his civic acts of whimsy is to declare that he will be promoting a “new order of merit” and confer a badge of honor on any citizens who “have patronized Caligula’s National Brothel most assiduously” (30). He adds, though, that anyone who fails to obtain the badge within a twelve-month period will be “exiled or executed.” His patricians are confused as to the “or” in his declaration, as the options are not equivocal. To this, his lover, Caesonia, replies, “Because Caligula says it doesn’t matter which – but it’s important he should have the right of choosing” (30). Here, Camus establishes
Caligula’s life of extreme freedom: one in which the choices themselves do not matter to him, only his freedom to choose.

This disregard for human life extends beyond his citizens to even to his closest companions. Logically, there is no reason to prioritize a colleague over any other citizen. At the beginning of Act II, he sits down to dine with his patricians, displaying noticeably bad table manners: flicking olive pits into neighboring dishes and picking his teeth with his nails. Decorum too seems useless in a meaningless world. He turns to Lepidus, one of his patricians, and says, “You’re looking grumpy, Lepidus. I wonder, can it be because I had your son killed?” (24-25). In the same meal, he declares that Rufius, one of his former attendants, will soon be put to death. When the declaration is met with silence, he asks “What’s this? None of you asks me why I’ve sentenced him to death?...Good for you! I see you’re growing quite intelligent… It dawns on you that a man needn’t have done anything for him to die” (Caligula 24). In his full embrace of the absurd, no one is safe.

Though his attendants find his conclusions inhumane and reprehensible, it is notable that none of the other characters can refute him. In Act II, Cherea concedes that “unfortunately for us – it’s a philosophy that’s logical from start to finish” (21); they are thus unable to dissuade him through logical means. This is reminiscent of Camus’ own critiques of other existential philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, who attempt to project meaning onto man’s existence. One may recall his critique of Kierkegaard’s argument that absurdity was a sign that humanity should undergo “the sacrifice of the intellect” and take a leap of faith that paradoxes such as this could only be understood in the eyes of God. Camus rejected that philosophy, stating that Kierkegaard merely “wants to be
cured” of the absurdity, so he invented a reason that satisfied his desire for eternity. Just
as Kierkegaard cannot offer Camus a value system that is within the “limits of reason,”
neither can Caligula’s attendants. As such, their pleas for Caligula’s cessation are
quickly dismissed:

   SCIPIO: Have you nothing of the kind in your life, no refuge, no mood that
         makes the tears well up, no consolation?
   CALIGULA: Yes, I have something of the kind.
   SCIPIO: What is it?
   CALIGULA: [very quietly] Scorn. (38)

Much like Camus, Caligula wishes to see his philosophy realized without
concessions to beliefs he finds fraudulent or illogical. He will not be sated by platitudes.
This is seen in Act IV, in which he offers a competition to local poets to expound on the
truth of a topic he provides: “Subject: Death. Time limit: one minute” (Caligula 64).
When the poets inquire as to who comprise the judging panel, he merely replies, “I. Isn’t
that enough?” (64). The poets are given the opportunity to then read their finished work
aloud, but, if he finds their position to be without substance, Caligula reserves the right to
interrupt them with a discharge from his anachronous coach’s whistle. Though each man
attempts in vain to read, none of them are able to say more than eight words before facing
a shrill blast and a rejection. Notably, none of these poets is able to convey anything
substantive in their early phrases: “Come to me Death, beloved…,” “Oh long, abstruse
orison…,” “Come to me, death beloved: (64-66). There is no way of knowing what sort
of explanations they will offer, but Caligula is already dissatisfied. Clearly, there is
something about trying to elucidate the nature of “death,” despite the prompt, that he resists (*Caligula* 64 – 66).

One poet tries an alternate approach (“When I was in my happy infancy…”), which, unlike his flippant dismissal of the others, Caligula directly ridicules: “Stop that! What earthly connection has a blockhead’s happy infancy with the theme I set? The connection! Tell me the connection!” (65) When the poet cannot, Caligula dismisses him with the rest. From this, one can infer that this response was potentially closer than the others to the emperor’s aims, as it was not rejected outright, but the poet was unable to finish the thought enough to make the full claim worthwhile.

The only poet Caligula allows to recite his poem to completion is Scipio, whose take on the topic is noticeably different than the others. Rather than emphasize death itself, Scipio speaks of life:

> “Pursuit of happiness that purifies the heart,
> Skies rippling with light,
> O wild, sweet, festal joys, frenzy without hope!” (66)

This is only sentiment that Caligula deems acceptable, stating, “You’re very young to understand so well the lessons we can learn from death” (66). This sentiment most closely echoes Camus’. This short poem emphasizes themes that are also explored in Camus’ journals and *Sisyphus*: the joys of sensory experience, particularly in nature, and the fact that they temporary and lead nowhere (“frenzy without hope”). Like Camus himself, these are the only truths that Caligula will deem acceptable. Scipio is excluded from the fate of the rest of the poets, who are dismissed from the throne room and
commanded to “lick [their] tablets so as to efface the atrocities [they] scrawled upon them” (67).

As seen from each of these examples, the primary method through which Camus conveys the absurd is dialogue. The audience does not see the citizens plunged into famine; they only hear tell of it. They do not see Druscilla’s body; Scipio and Cherea merely describe it. They do not witness Lepidus’s son’s execution or even the declaration that he will be put to death; it happened both in the past and off stage. With the notable exception of one scene in Act IV, in which Caligula dons a tutu and matching flower crown and proceeds to perform “some grotesque dance movements” (59), most of the absurd elements of the play are verbal. As aptly described by theatrical critic Arthur Sonnenfeld, “As so often happens when the action is unsuitable for stage representation, the dramatist is forced to rely on messengers…” (Sonnenfeld 112).

This may be excusable in the case of public execution; realistic beheadings are both theatrically challenging to recreate and nauseating to watch. However, in certain other cases, Camus seems to lean heavily into dialogue in areas where stage directions may be more appropriate. For example, in the scene where Caligula is taunting Lepidus with the death of his son, Camus does not write in any stage directions that would allow the actors to physically convey their respective feelings on the execution: Lepidus’s discomfort and Caligula’s joy at seeing him that way. It would be easy to write in a grimace or to have Caligula laugh, but, instead, Camus opts to have Caligula verbally deliver how the audience should interpret this situation: “Your face is sad” (25).

Sonnefeld believes that reliance on dialogue may contribute to what he calls Camus’ “failure as a dramatist” (123). He writes, “We are too far removed from prosaic reality
here to acknowledge the veracity of Caligula’s, and Camus’, discovery that our lives are
governed by sham and pretense” (112). This stylistic choice creates a distancing effect.
Rather than physically observing and becoming a part of the action, the audience is
relegated to playing out the action mentally.

Though these staging decisions make it challenging for viewers to directly
experience the absurd, they do allow for audience members to logically entertain it.
Sonnenfeld writes, “In his plays, Camus simply forces his theories into his character’s
speeches…” (115-116). Many of the scenes in which the patricians confront or challenge
Caligula are presented in a similar fashion to Socratic dialogues, a rhetorical structure
employed by the classic philosopher Plato. In each of his dialogues, Plato presents his
philosophical ideas through *elenchus*: a dialectic, back-and-forth conversation between a
fictionalized version of his mentor, Socrates, and another party. For example, in Plato’s
*Euthyphro*, Socrates and the titular character discuss the nature of piety:

> SOCRATES: …But just at present I would rather hear from you a more precise
answer, which you have not as yet given, my friend, to the question, What is
‘piety’? When asked, you only replied, Doing as you do, charging your father
with murder.

> EUTHYPHRO: And what I said was true, Socrates.

> SOCRATES: No doubt, Euthyphro; but you would admit that there are many
other pious acts?

> EUTHYPHRO: There are.
SOCRATES: Remember that I did not ask you to give me two or three examples of piety, but to explain the general idea which makes all pious things to be pious.

(*Euthyphro 16*)

As seen here, the nature of the dialogue allows each participant to present their ideas on a given topic and challenge one another’s thinking. Here, Socrates points out that Euthyphro’s assertions about piety are flawed by pointing out that he has listed examples rather than creating a holistic definition for the term. The criticism allows for Euthyphro, and readers, to amend their definitions. Platonic scholar Rebecca Bensen Cain writes, “The *elenchus* is identified with a logical device Socrates uses for refuting the interlocutor by testing his alleged knowledge, or a set of beliefs, for consistency. The interlocutor puts forward a thesis that he thinks is true. By means of a series of questions and answers, Socrates is able to draw the opposite conclusion from the interlocutor’s thesis from premises that the interlocutor accepts” (Bensen Cain 6). Thus, in this example, Plato’s ideals appear superior to Euthyphro’s based on their ability to resist criticism. This approach is rhetorically strong, as the readers are able to reject the claims along with the characters, leading them to the same conclusions as the author.

Likewise, Camus employs a similar technique in *Caligula*. Many of the emperor’s encounters with his patricians take a dialectic form, with Caligula arguing in favor of nihilism and the other in favor of a specific value. For example, towards the end of the play, he engages in dialogue with Caesonia, who argues that her love for him and the tenderness that they shared is, unlike all else he has discarded, worth preserving:

CAESONIA: Tell me you mean to keep me with you.
CALIGULA: I don’t know. All I know – and it’s the most terrible thing of all – is that this shameful tenderness is one sincere emotion that my life has given up to now…Wouldn’t it be better that the last witness should disappear?

CAESONIA: That has no importance. All I know is: I’m happy. What you’ve just said has made me very happy. But why can’t I share my happiness with you?

CALIGULA: Who says I’m unhappy?

CAESONIA: Happiness is kind. It doesn’t thrive on bloodshed.

CALIGULA: Then there must be two kinds of happiness. I have chosen the murderous kind. For I am happy. (Caligula 70 – 71)

Here, Caesonia is unable to convince Caligula logically that their affair should carry any objective value; her criticism that he cannot be happy because happiness is a kind emotion is rejected on the basis that Caligula continues to feel happy in destruction. As such, because of his dedication to logic, he determines that there is no objective reason she should be immune to his murderous rampage, and he strangles her with his bare hands: “Happiness it is, Caesonia. I know what I’m saying” (71). Even this act of murder is accompanied by a lengthy soliloquy in which he verbalizes his motivations for killing her, “the ruthless logic that crushes out human lives” (72). So, while the audience may, as Sonnenfeld points out, remain emotionally distant from the actual action, the philosophical concept is still adequately conveyed. By triumphing both verbally and physically over his opposition, Caligula has won the debate. There is no logical position that will convince him that he should value human life.

Though the emperor’s nihilism cannot be countered logically, it is notable that Camus himself rejected the conclusions of Caligula’s decision-making, referring to it as
“the most human and most tragic of errors” (“Author’s Preface” v). He writes, “…if his truth is to rebel against fate, his error lies in negating what binds him to mankind. One cannot destroy everything without destroying oneself” (“Author’s Preface” v). Caligula may not be objectively wrong, but he has isolated himself from his humanity and found the path of nihilism empty. This is much like Camus’ conclusions on suicide: that it merely rushes the inevitable and fails to appreciate the sensory experiences of the present moment. Thus, Caligula’s reign of terror must also come to an end. In the final scene, he laments, “I have chosen the wrong path: the path that leads to nothing” (*Caligula* 73). Upon this declaration, he is swarmed by his conspirators and stabbed in the face by Scipio and Cherea.

Camus’ commentary on his main character indicates that he considered the text to be didactic. Caligula does not merely die in the text because the play is a tragedy; rather, his death carries with it a moral truth. According to Sonnenfeld, “Camus’ attitude toward Caligula is ambivalent. While he admires the Emperor for having reached that level of awareness which enables him to deny the gods (and, by gods, Camus means all abstract belief from table manners to justice), he despises him for denying man. The audience is supposed to share this attitude” (112). Camus describes Caligula’s fall as necessary in order to illustrate the “havoc” this attitude wreaks upon man, thus “bringing out its failure – such was my intention” (“Author’s Preface” v).

As such, Camus is successful in staging a logical exercise and conveying an idea. However, by minimizing stage directions and the set, the effect is cerebral, rather than physically manifested. Theatre critic Martin Esslin wrote of Camus’ work:
“If Camus argued that in our disillusioned age the world had ceased to make sense, he did so in the elegantly rationalistic and discursive style of an eighteenth-century morality, in well-constructed and polished plays… And the beautiful phrasing and argumentative brilliance of both Sartre and Camus in their relentless probing still, by implication, proclaim a tacit conviction that logical discourse can offer valid solutions…” (24).

However, Camus was not the only playwright during his time to expound on man facing the absurd. This theme would populate in many post-war theatrical productions. Martin Esslin conceptually links Camus with these writers based on “a similar sense of the senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose” (24).

One of the more notable parallels would come in the works of Eugène Ionesco, who, in 1962, also penned a play about an aging monarch facing the reality of absurd demise. However, based on the stylistic differences in terms of dialogue structure, set design, and stage directions, his production would take on a different rhetorical function than Camus’.
Chapter 4

The Absurd in the Face of Death: Ionesco’s *Exit the King*

Few playwrights are plagued by fear of death in quite the same way as Eugène Ionesco: “I have always been obsessed by death. Since the age of four…this anguish has never left me” (qtd in Dobrez 168). This obsession brought about behavior that might, in modern terms, been considered obsessive compulsive: “As I finally understood it, people died because they’d been ill, because they’d had an accident – and if you took great care not to be ill, if you were very good, if you always wore your muffler and took your medicine, if you looked both ways before you crossed the street then you wouldn’t ever have to die” (Bonnefory 11). Eventually, the young Ionesco would question aging and, if his hypothesis about death held true, exactly how old one could expect to become if they were indeed very careful.

In an interview with Claude Bonnefoy, he recalled clearly his first realization that this theory was flawed: “One day, I asked my mother. ‘We’re all going to die, aren’t we? Tell me the truth.’ She said, ‘Yes.’ I must have been four years old, maybe five…I was very frightened. I kept thinking she was going to die one day. And I couldn’t stop thinking about it…” (Bonnefory 12). The reality of his own mortality would continue to plague him throughout this life and show up in many of his fictional works. As such, because of their mutual meditations on life in the face of death, Ionesco and Camus share notable similarities in content, though larger deviations on style.

Ionesco uses the absurd reality of facing death as the subject of many of his plays, though perhaps most notably in 1962’s *Exit the King*. The text was written over the
course of 20 days, during which Ionesco was on bed rest while recovering from a serious illness. “I had been ill,” he relayed, “and I’d been very scared” (Bonnefoy 78). He relayed that the illness merely expedited an idea that he had long been planning to flesh out: “an apprenticeship in dying” (Bonnefoy 79).

The plot centers on the character of King Bérenger. Those familiar with Ionesco’s other theatrical works will note that this is the third of four plays in the Bérenger cycle, the others being The Killer (1958), Rhinoceros (1959), and A Stroll in the Air (1963). Although each of these plays feature a main character with the name of Bérenger, each incarnation is biographically different. In The Killer, he is an inquisitive, average citizen. In Rhinoceros, he is an alcoholic who lacks motivation, whereas Exit the King’s incarnation sees Bérenger as an aging monarch of an undisclosed kingdom. The connection amongst them, though, is that Ioensco presents Bérenger as an “everyman.” In this case, the choice is especially appropriate; the play itself echoes themes present in the 15th century morality play of the same name. In Everyman, the titular character is told that, at his death, he will face the judgment of God and be assessed based on his actions on earth. As the story progresses, Everyman journeys onward and tries to convince several characters to join with him and accompany him on to death, including Good Deeds, Beauty, Strength, and Knowledge. Unfortunately, when faced with his own mortality, most of them must abandon him and can no longer accompany him on to death. Only Good Deeds remains. The resolution of this play is often used to teach Christian values: that only one’s good actions will accompany one to the afterlife. (Ward)

While parallels can be drawn between these two plays, Ionesco himself vehemently expressed opposition to presenting ideology in theatre: “…to deliver a
message to the world, to wish to direct its course, to save it, is the business of the
founders of religions, of the moralists or the politicians... A playwright simply writes
plays, in which he can offer only a testimony, not a didactic message...” (qtd, in Esslin
129).

That is not to say that Ionesco believed that philosophy and theatre were
diametrically opposed. Rather, the role of philosophy in theatre should be relegated to
posing problems, rather than advocating for solutions. In an interview with Claude
Bonnefoy in 1971, he clarified his position: “Art is philosophical in so far as philosophy
means exploration, posing problems, questioning, adopting an attitude. What I call
ideology is a closed system, giving ‘clichéized’ explanations” (124). In this case, the use
of an “everyman” character is appropriate, as death impacts everyone equally, even those
who wield great earthly power. Thus, Ionesco can use him to explore the concept of
death without preaching on how best to meet it.

In the play, Bérenger’s kingdom is slowly declining. Not only is the country in
the midst of economic decline, but these conditions are also mirrored by the state of the
castle itself; when attempting to fix the radiator, the castle guard reveals, “I don't know,
this is just the time when it ought to be hot. Central heating, start up! Nothing doing, it's
not working. Central heating, start up! The radiator's stone cold” (Exit the King 8).
Nothing in the castle is working quite the way it used to years ago. Even the king’s two
wives, the stony Marguerite and the naïve Marie, find their clothing tattered, falling apart,
and covered in cobwebs; Marguerite specifically is described as “wearing a deep crimson
cloak that is a bit shabby” (Exit the King 8).
This use physical dilapidation in the costumes and scenery echoes that of the King Bérenger himself. Unbeknownst to him, his wives have become privy with information about his health from the local physician. The king’s time is up; he is to die by the conclusion of the play. The reality of his death upsets Marie, the younger and more optimistic of the wives. She pleads with Marguerite in hopes that she will not have to reveal this truth to the king, wishing to spare him the knowledge of his own demise out of a sense of pity for him. The more cynical and pragmatic Marguerite indicates that he should confront his death directly rather than have it take him by surprise:

MARIE: “No, don’t tell him. It’s better if he doesn’t notice anything.”

MARGUERITE: “…and goes out like a light? That’s impossible.” (Exit the King 11)

When the king arrives on stage, he is noticeably in bad health. He totters in on a limp, complaining of stiff legs and a strained back: “How do you feel? I feel awful! I don't know quite what's wrong with me” (Exit the King 19). He blames conditions beyond himself; perhaps his slippers are too tight, or perhaps it is lumbago. Bérenger retains a state of blissful ignorance of his upcoming demise. Though his health is poor and his kingdom decrepit, he remains ignorant that these signs point to his demise, a situation that Marie tries to extend for as long as she can: “He feels quite well…Don't you?” (Exit the King 24). Ultimately, Marguerite decides that she must tell him directly: “Sire, we have to inform you that you are going to die” (Exit the King 21).

The news does not go over well. Bérenger remains in denial of his mortality and pushes her warnings aside. Marguerite refuses to cave to his logic and reveals to him the exact moment of his death: “You’re going to die in an hour and a half; you’re going to
die at the end of the show” (Ionesco 24).  Still, he declares himself immortal due to his position: “I'll die when I want to. I'm the king. I'm the one to decide” (Exit the King 25).

Throughout the remainder play, Bérenger proceeds through the shock and denial of his own mortality, making similar observations to that of Camus in Sisyphus. Up until this point, he recognized that death applied to him, but only in a theoretical sense. Now, he is faced with the reality as an immediate one, which he had not anticipated. Bérenger reveals that he expected to have more time: “I came into the world five minutes ago. I got married three minutes ago” (Exit the King 45). The reality to him is absurd: that he will have lived his life only to die and with the possibility of no longer being remembered. In vain, he begs for some eternal mark so that his subjects will not forget him. Like Camus in Sisyphus, he cannot reconcile that he has lived a long and full life, only for it to amount to very little:

“When I've gone, when I've gone. They'll laugh and stuff themselves silly and dance on my tomb. As if I'd never existed. Oh, please make them all remember me! Make them weep and despair and perpetuate my memory in all their history books. Make everyone learn my life by heart. Make them all live it again. Let the schoolchildren and the scholars study nothing else but me, my kingdom and my exploits. Let them burn all the other books, destroy all the statues and set mine up in all the public squares. My portrait in every Ministry, my photograph in every office of every Town Hall, including Rates and Taxes, and in all the hospitals. Let every car and pushcart, flying ship and steamplane be named after me. Make them forget all other captains and kings, poets, tenors and philosophers, and fill every
conscious mind with memories of me. Let them learn to read by spelling out my name: B, E, BE for Bérenger…” (48 – 49).

Like Camus, Ionesco also conveys the futility of meaning in the face of death through dialogue, but his approach renders a different conclusion. During the play, Bérenger pleads with the world to instill upon him some wisdom on how to die. He implores those who came before him to teach him what they learned, “Tell me how you managed to accept death and die. Then teach me!” (Ionesco 54). Though Marie, The Guard, the Doctor, and Marguerite each pleads for the ghosts of the past to appear and teach the king their preferred way to approach his mortality – serenity, indifference, resignation, and reason -- he is not granted any assurance of which path is the best one. The stage remains silent. The ghosts never appear, and Bérenger receives no answer.

Here, we have a distinction between Ionesco and Camus. In Caligula, Camus uses verbal exchanges in order to establish the logical value of certain approaches to life. Based on which idea triumphs through elenchus, the audience can determine which of the two is superior. Conversely, none of the exchanges in Exit the King end with a clear, discernable victor. Bérenger presents the question, but he receives no answer in return. As such, Ionesco’s play avoids becoming the type of didactic theatre that he dislikes.

Many of the elements that Ionesco incorporates in the play, including dialogue, physical comedy, and set design are nonsensical and extreme, which help to emphasize the absurdity of human death. For example, Marguerite reveals that Bérenger’s age is beyond that of a normal human being: “At fifty, you wanted first to reach your sixties. And so you went on, from sixty to ninety to a hundred and twenty-five to two hundred, until you were four hundred years old” (38). Though no real human could reach the age
of 400, the effect of such a hyperbole in the play emphasizes the feeling of how quickly the years pass and age accrues. Ionesco is able to create an accurate feeling for the audience of large amounts of time slipping by quickly without relying on the number being realistic. It also adds to the absurdity of the play; it thwarts logic in the same way that Camus’ sword and machine gun example does: by presenting a situation that is true to the world of the play, albeit disproportionate to our expectations.

Ionesco’s protagonist also utilizes physical demands and directions in order to cling to life. When he is not pleading for guidance, Bérenger is actively putting up a fight to retain a hold on his kingdom, clinging even symbolic representations of his rule. When the maid Juliette approaches to swap his crown with a nightcap, he actively refuses: “I won’t wear that!” Juliette tries to placate him, “It’s a sort of crown, but not so heavy” (Exit the King 43). In trying to convince the Doctor that his medical examinations are flawed, he demands “a fanfare” as evidence that his time has not yet come, as though this auditory symbol of his position will act as some sort of buffer from death (Exit the King 58). None of these items, even when can attain them, pushes his death any further into the future, and his reign, no matter how he clings to it, will come to an end.

Interestingly, of the many things symbols of worldly power used in the text, one of the king’s demands could potentially be a direct send-up to Camus. Remarking on the king desperately clutching symbols of power or immortality, the Doctor comments, “When kings die, they clutch at the walls, the trees, the fountains, the moon” (Exit the King 79). The decision to conclude that line with “the moon,” of all objects, could be coincidental, but it does harken back to Camus’ absurdist protagonist, who demands the
same object when confronting his demise: “All I want, Helicon, is -- the moon” (*Caligula* 46)

One of the most memorable of the king’s vain attempts to retain his rule comes in the form of a physical comedy scene in which the court tries to revitalize King Bérenger for a royal procession by screaming out the phrase, “Long live the king!” Each time that the phrase is shouted, Bérenger is able to scramble to his feet, but, once silence falls again, he collapses onto his face. They continue to chant, and he continues to pull himself up and then immediately fold. This cycle of the physical comedy, of rising and falling, creates a humorous scene for audience members that they can ultimately read as fruitless vanity. No matter how many times the court shouts “Long live the king!,” it only has a temporary effect. When he realizes that he is unable to sustain his pace, he makes a desperate dash for his throne:

JULIETTE: He wants to sit on his throne.

MARIE: The King still reigns! The King still reigns!

DOCTOR: And now for the delirium.

MARIE *(to the KING, who is trying to totter up the steps of his throne)*: Don't let go, hang on! *(To JULIETTE, who is trying to help the KING:)* Leave him alone!

He can do it alone!

*The KING fails to climb the steps of the throne.* *(Exit the King 59)*

The stage directions in this scene further physicalize the feelings of futility. By manifesting desperation through the actor’s movements on stage, Bérenger’s attempts to thwart death are visual and direct. Intellectually understanding a state of futility is different than seeing it directly. Through this method, the audience can watch and
experience his desperation, thereby capturing the emotional truth more fully than if it were recreated purely in dialogue, which would render the futility only theoretical.

Unlike Caligula, which requires directorial intervention to impose physical action, *Exit the King* is inherently a highly active, physical play. Camus writes in little in the way of stage directions, but Ionesco uses them in abundance. Throughout the play, actors are leaping, collapsing, sleepwalking, and even disappearing. In a review of the 2007 Australian production starring Geoffrey Rush, whose success would land him the same role in the 2009 Broadway production, *The Age* reporter and drama critic Cameron Woodhead wrote, “*Exit The King* is a hugely demanding play. It requires comic mastery - there are slapstick near-death experiences and visual gags aplenty” (Woodhead). In fact, when Rush accepted the role, he was struck by what he called “the play’s brazen theatricality— it was like Ionesco was throwing great gobs of phosphorus and paint at the canvas…” (Healy). This action, though demanding for performers, allows the play to become less didactic and more experiential. Esslin writes, “The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is, in the terms of concrete stage images” (25).

Ionesco also captures this emotional, rather than physical, reality through careful set design. Whereas *Caligula* is anchored in concrete, specific locations (a state room in the imperial palace, a proscenium stage, the palace gardens), the setting of *Exit the King* is much less determinate. Readers know that the entirety of the action takes place in “the throne room, vaguely dilapidated, vaguely Gothic,” but the set is largely devoid of realistic furnishings. Ionesco does indicate that his set requires two doors, three thrones, and a stained glass window, but he provides no other pieces of furniture in his
descriptions. This minimalism creates a greater distance from life by dislodging it from physical reality. Esslin describes this as “the striving for integration between the subject-matter and form” (25). Whereas Camus’ *Caligula* offers realistic settings and situations, *Exit the King* aims for thematic, rather than literal, truth. The decision sacrifices reality for a stronger representation of the “feeling” of the absurd in the face of death.

At the play’s conclusion, these set pieces, and Bérenger with them, literally dissolve in front of the audience’s eyes. The stage direction reads: “This disappearance of the windows, the doors and the walls, the KING and the throne must be very marked, but happen slowly and gradually. The KING sitting on his throne should remain visible for a short time before fading into a kind of mist” (Ionesco 95). Critic Paul Vernois comments on Ionesco’s stylistic choices, emphasizing that “without a doubt, the kingdom shrinks from day to day like the king’s intimate entourage, but there is something more serious: the domain which feels the senses of dying shrinks also” (qtd. in Tener 185). Thus, audience members are left with the experience of facing one’s death without any conclusive advice on how to handle their own. This most readily suits Ionesco’s preferences, for, in his own words, “I believe that, as Nabokov said, an author should not have to deliver a message because he is not a postman” (Guppy 12). However, in absence of a solution, it still leaves audience members with something to contemplate. In a 2009 interview with the New York Times, Rush expressed, “When I’m performing the play, I think there’s 1,000 people out there who are collectively enjoying the boisterous burlesque of this charade. But I bet there are also 1,000 absolutely distinct human beings having a very private discourse with themselves, thinking, ‘I wonder how I’m going to be when I have to make my final exit?’” (Healy).
Thus, in *Exit the King*, Ionesco also is able to translate the sort of absurdity in the face of death that Camus describes from a logical exercise into a theatrical impression, one that allows the audience to feel in lieu of intellectualizing.
Chapter 5

Absurdism Expanded: Rebels and Revolt

Camus would never abandon his absurdist philosophy. Yet, post-World War II, it would undergo major development in the face of political crisis. As France recovered from the horrors of Nazi occupation, public attention turned to reparation, and individuals were forced to confront the atrocities of a war that had left the European homefront in shambles. Moreover, the world was forced to reckon with the abasement of human morality brought on by the devastation of the Holocaust and the development of the atom bomb. According to Bakewell, these circumstances “made people realize that they and their fellow humans were capable of departing entirely from civilized norms; no wonder the idea of fixed human nature seemed questionable. Whatever new world was going to arise out of the old one, it would probably need to be built without reliable guidance from sources of authority such as politicians, religious leaders, and even philosophers…” (At the Existentialist Café, 10). World War II had served as a concrete reminder that none of these structures could protect against corruption.

According to Rhein, “Through his reflections on the absurd, Camus could say in 1943 that the only serious philosophical problem was the one of suicide; but confronted with the Hitler terror, the occupation, resistance, and final liberation of France, the Communist successes in France, and the events of the Cold War, he soon discovered that the stoic comfort offered by Sisyphus was of little solace or value” (80). Absurdism affirms that humanity is not bound to a single, superior outcome and advises us to, like Sisyphus, find joy in the ability to experience the world. Yet, few can “imagine Sisyphus happy” for the experience of human atrocity. As such, many critics regard his next major
philosophical work, *The Rebel (L'Homme révolté)*, to be a continuation of the mediations started in *Sisyphus*. In the work, he expands on extended conclusions of his argument that suicide was untenable. From that singular observation, he develops guidance on how to live in an absurd world.

In *Sisyphus*, Camus rejects suicide on the basis that it is “acceptance to the extreme” of absurdity; it rushes one into a conclusion that is already inevitable. Therefore, one should live and, like the mythic Sisyphus, find joy in persistence and the ability to experience through sensory means. By this logic, in *The Rebel*, he concludes that the absurd also renders violence, like suicide, unjustifiable. To decry suicide and allow murder is nonsensical; if one is expected to “persist” subjectively, one should not rob others of the same opportunity. Camus writes, “Absurdist reasoning cannot defend the continued existence of its spokesman and, simultaneously, accept the sacrifice of others’ lives” (*The Rebel* 5).

With that conclusion, it follows that repressive regimes like those seen in totalitarian states are, to Camus, morally impermissible. Moreover, he considers the aims of totalitarianism illogical. Totalitarian regimes, by nature, aim at creating perfection, a state Camus believes unattainable and in denial of human reality. Through this, they deny humanity’s natural state and force it to conform to a value that, like the religious dogma he critiques in *Sisyphus*, is not verifiable. In *Sisyphus*, he used Kierkegaard’s Christianity as representative this sort of fallacy. Here, Camus cites Marxism as a major offender. He writes, “Since that value [of Marxism] is, at the same time, foreign to ethics, it is not, properly speaking, a value on which one can base one’s conduct; it is a dogma without foundation that can be adopted only as the desperate effort
to escape of a mind which is being stifled by solitude or by nihilism, or a value which is
going to be imposed by those whom dogma profits” (222). He believes that most
totalitarian regimes are subject to the same logic as Kierkegaard: wishing to impose a
value onto a structure in order to escape the absurd. In the name of this unknown value,
many regimes will justify actions that deny humanity – repression of speech, limitations
on resources, and physical abuse. To use a modern maxim, adherents rationalize this as
“the ends justify the means,” that the nobility of their goals grants them pardon for their
actions. To Camus, though, this justification is false; the possibility of future justification
is groundless, whereas the ethical repulsion to present suffering is observable. The
absurd is incompatible with justifying suffering for dogmatic purposes. According to
Rhein, “…in the literature of revolt, man can no longer afford to be an indifferent
stranger. He lives in the same absurd world, bereft of all metaphysical aid; but rather
than being satisfied to describe that world, Camus now insists that man must fashion a
world of unity and value” (Rhein 136).

Camus expands his critique of totalitarianism and violence beyond the Nazism
that plagued France during the Occupation or Marxism; to him, all forms of violent
control were, by their nature, worth opposing. As such, he was equally critical of the
United States’ bombing of Hiroshima: “We'll sum it up in one sentence: mechanical
civilization has just reached its final degree of savagery” (“Albert Camus on
Hiroshima”). This unyielding commitment to nonviolence created one of the many
conflicts that put him at odds with Sartre, whose belief in the notion of “commitment”
leant itself to such idealistic purposes as a society aimed at reshaping man; Sartre’s post-
war sympathies lay with the idealism of the Soviet Union.
Though *The Rebel* would not be published in France until 1951, ghosts of similar sentiments cropped up in some of Camus’ literary and theatrical works, most notably his 1947 novel, *The Plague*, and his 1948 play, *State of Siege*. Here again, Camus stylistically dramatizes his theories of the absurd, and, once again, his predilection for didacticism pervades the script at the cost of a more experiential piece.
Chapter 6:
The Absurd in the Face of Totalitarianism: Camus’ *State of Siege*

One of his lesser known compositions, *State of Siege* is a highly allegorical work that focuses on a city where political control is seized by a dictatorial figure known as The Plague. Readers familiar with Camus’ other works will draw a natural parallel to the aforementioned novel. However, while a thematic connection exists, in that both deal with rebellion in the face of forces trying to quell man’s freedom, Camus disavowed the idea that the play was meant to be an adaptation of the novel; he insists that the character’s name was purely “symbolic” in that “since he is a dictator, that appellation is correct” (Author’s Preface, viii).

Camus chose to set the play in Spain, a decision that theatre critic Gabriel Marcel criticized in his *Nouvelles Littéraires* review, claiming that a location in the Eastern-bloc would have been more appropriate for the subject matter. He indicated that Camus lacked the courage to directly call out Eastern European dictatorships. Camus found his claim both insulting and inaccurate, and he chose to follow up on the critique in a letter because “when you state that the setting shows a lack of courage and fairness, you are asking for a reply” (73). This critique was later published as the essay “Why Spain?.” In it, he noted that Marcel’s criticism implied that countries like Spain were immune to totalitarian control, an assertion he finds baseless:

“You write that, for the well-informed, Spain is not now the source of the news most likely to spread despair among men who respect human dignity. You are not well informed, Gabriel Marcel…You have forgotten that in 1936 a rebellious general, in the name of Christ, raised up an army of Moors, hurled them against
the legally constituted government of the Spanish Republic, won victory for an
unjust cause after massacres that can never be expiated, and initiated a frightful
repression that has lasted ten years and is not yet over. Yes, indeed, why Spain?
Because you, like so many others, do not remember” (75-76).

Camus, who considered the Spanish Civil War a tragedy, accused Marcel of an
inclination to ignore the atrocities of any countries who aligned with him politically:
“…you are willing to keep silent about one reign of terror in order the better to combat
another one. There are some of us who do not want to keep silent about anything” (78).

Camus refused to distinguish between a right-leaning or left-leaning totalitarian
government; the structure and infringement upon human liberty was pervasive in either.
Thus, he indicated that his goal in State of Siege was to denounce totalitarianism in all of
its forms: “I focused my play on what seems to me the only living religion in the century
of tyrants and slaves – I mean liberty” (Author’s Preface, ix).

State of Siege opens on the streets of a fortified Spanish city, Cadiz, where the
populace is engrossed in a rare visual spectacle: a comet trailing across the city skyline.
The citizens squabble over the meaning of the event. Some of them, like the governor,
believe the comet is purely a natural phenomenon, while others worry that it is an ill
omen, one that signifies “a sign of war” (138). Only one character is indifferent to the
foreboding: Nada, a crippled drunkard who proclaims his belief “in nothing in the world,
except wine” (141) He criticizes the rhythmic, predictable ways in which the other
townsmen live their lives, as though their routines will protect them from the
inevitability of their own deaths. If the comet is in indeed a sign of destruction, he
welcomes it, for “life and death are one, and man’s a faggot for the burning” (140). Nada
expresses his disdain for the citizens’ attempts to provoke meaning out of the comet, proclaiming that “…nothing on this rotten earth of ours, no king, no comet, no moral code, will ever get me down” (142-143).

Nada’s proclamations on his indifference to the end of the world align themselves philosophically with nihilism, the belief that there life is inherently meaningless. This is reflected even in his name, “nada” being the Spanish word for “nothing.” As such, readers can infer going forward that his fate in the text will align with Camus’ own conclusions on facing totalitarianism and nihilism’s role within it.

Through the inclusion of Nada in the prologue, Camus quickly establishes the play’s function as an allegory. As in Caligula, he has once again employed a strategy in which individual characters will stand for philosophical approaches to the problem of the play and their fates within it will determine which approach Camus finds preferable. He himself admits the strategy, writing “…it is utterly useless to accuse my characters of being symbolical. I plead guilty” (Author’s Preface, ix).

The character that challenges Nada’s nihilism in this scene is Diego, a young man who is engaged to the judge’s daughter, Victoria. He criticizes Nada’s dismissal of all value, stating, “No one is above honor,” and advises him, “Save up your scorn; some day you’ll need it” (142). Diego dismisses Nada’s cynical prophecies on the grounds that he has no time for them; he has devoted himself to his newfound happiness with his fiancée. Here, by challenging Nada’s nihilism, Camus sets up the structure for elenchus. Audience members can infer that, as with Camus’ previous uses of elenchus, Diego’s belief in honor will at some point come up against Nada’s nihilism. Based on the results of their interactions, we can infer Camus’ perspective on which ideology is preferred.
In the first act, the town’s fears about the comet are realized; it signals the arrival of a plague. Camus includes a “pantomime” in which “[o]ne of the actors on the raised platform, while moving to the front and gesturing, staggers and topples over the edge among the crowd, which surges in on the fallen body” (152). After the doctor examines the corpse, a member of the crowd mimes demands for an explanation. The doctor whispers one to him, and the man, “as if the word were too big to be got out,” shouts it to the audience: “Plague!” (152). The scene quickly devolves as the crowd begins to panic. Many of the theistic members of the community offer the crowd remedies from their religious tradition – herbs (the sorceress), prayer (the priest), clairvoyance (the astrologer) – but their efforts are in vain. More members begin to drop to the ground, “writhe convulsively, move their arms feebly, and die” (154). The plague has taken ahold of the city and, as the citizens quickly learn, in more ways than one.

The plague appears in the play not only as an affliction, but also as a character. Accompanied by his Secretary, a woman who carries a notebook, he arrives on the scene and begins to assert his control:

THE MAN: [still in a matter-of-fact voice] I am...the Plague – if you really must know.

THE GOVERNOR: What’s that you said? The Plague?

THE MAN: Yes, and I must ask you to hand over your post to me. I hate having to rush you like this, please take my word for it; but I shall have a lot to do here. Suppose I give you two hours to transfer your functions to me? Do you think that would be enough? (State of Siege 161)
When the governor refuses to relinquish control, the Plague points to some of his officers, and the Secretary makes a motion in her notebook as though she is crossing out a word. Each time, an officer falls dead. The Plague calmly asks the governor, “Have I made it sufficiently clear that you’d do well to take me seriously?” (161 – 162). Daunted by the Secretary’s supernatural abilities, the governor exchanges his life for his post, leaving the town under the Plague’s jurisdiction.

The Plague begins to impose his will onto the populace with sweeping declarations, providing strict order and bureaucracy. Many of his mandates are phrased in such a way that they could arguably be considered in the population’s best interest. These include decrees that all citizens keep pads of vinegar in their mouths because “words are carriers of the infection” (169) and that all infected houses, for the sake of public health, must be marked with “the plague sign – a black star with rays a foot long” (166). The Plague’s town criers insist that obedience is of utmost importance and that any lapses in duty will be “punished with the utmost rigor of the law” (166, 169). These conditions – marking specific “contaminated” citizens with stars (similar to the Star of David) and discouraging communication – were suppression tactics administered by the Nazi regime, ones that would be easily recognizable in post-Occupation France. As such, audience members can easily make an association between Plague and recent totalitarian dictators, as well as the rhetoric that accompanied the regimes: the sacrifice of individual freedoms for the sake of a nebulous public good. Hallmarks of life under the Nazi regime in occupied France included “the steady erosion of the distinction between private and public good” and “‘common good’ over private” (Kobrak et al. 16).
The Plague’s new mandates do provide the city of Cadiz with order; every decree comes with a new organizational structure to render all actions both predictable and controllable, even death: “As from today you are going to learn to die in an orderly manner. Until now you died in the Spanish manner, haphazard—when you felt like it, so to say…But, happily for you, I shall impose order on all that. There will be no more dying as the fancy takes you. Lists will be kept up—what admirable things lists are!—and we shall fix the order of your going” (171-172). This too fits with the notion common to totalitarian regimes that outside structures must be imposed in order to quell disorder.

This new order comes at a significant cost: bureaucratic overreach. Most actions, even trivial ones, under the Plague’s rule must be pre-approved and issued a government-sanctioned certificate. Even the act of continuing to live requires citizens to apply for a “certificate of existence” (175). Unfortunately, the process is often debilitatingly lengthy and unclear. For example, when a woman’s house is requisitioned, she is told that she needs to submit an application for a new one, but that process also had pre-requisite paperwork:

THE WOMAN: [taking the form] But will it go through quickly?

NADA: Yes, provided you claim priority and support your claim with the necessary documents.

THE WOMAN: What exactly is needed?

NADA: A duly authenticated certificate declaring that it’s a matter of urgency for you to be given accommodation.
THE WOMAN: My children haven’t anywhere to sleep. Surely that’s urgent enough for anyone?

NADA: You will not be given accommodation because your children are homeless. You will be given if you supply a certificate. (185)

Camus uses these examples of public desperation in the face of the new system in such a way that demonstrates the harsh limitations it places on individual behaviors. This imposition on freedom is incompatible with his absurdism for the same reasons he opposes church dogma. In *The Rebel*, he would later write, “The rebel undoubtedly demands a certain degree of freedom for himself; but in no case, if he is consistent, does he demand the right to destroy the existence and the freedom of others” (282).

The inclusion of Nada in the new bureaucracy also reinforces Camus’ absurdist philosophy. In order for the Plague to impose his new systems, he enlists Nada as one of his associates, tasking him with bureaucratic duties such as reviewing applications and checking that citizens have proper credentials. Nada is all too happy to provide service; the confusion and public frustration serve his own ends: “Down with everything! Nobody knows what anybody means—the golden age has come” (186). In allowing Nada to be complicit with the dictatorship, Camus is able to reinforce his notions about the dangers of total nihilism, much in the way that he did in *Caligula*. Nada can provide a warning about the dangers of purely nihilistic attitudes towards the absurd. According to philosopher Michael Novak, “For Camus, nihilism was first of all a personal problem. He also saw it as a political problem, involving incalculable potential violence. First, if human life—if the universe—is empty of meaning, then how ought I to live? (Can "ought" have any meaning?) Besides, if the universe lacks meaning, then aren't the Nazis
just as light as anybody else? Why shouldn't they do as they please, with whatever violence it takes? If they could make Walpurgisnacht come to life, why not? If there is no right and no wrong, then anything goes. Power rules. The thugs decide” (Novak x-xi).

The affiliation between the Secretary and the Plague contributes to the success of the Plague’s endeavors. Mandates may be enforced because she carries the ultimate punishment. By crossing off a name in her ledger, the offending party is immediately struck dead. Though she is never named explicitly in the play, her descriptions lend audience members to believe she is the incarnation of death. When the pair first arrives, the Plague tells the governor, “As a matter of fact, you know her, though perhaps her sex misleads you” (161), perhaps referencing that death is more typically personified as male in allegorical literature. She herself makes references to the fact that “the perfect secretary is sure that everything can always be put right; that there’s no muddle in the accounts that can’t be straightened in time, and no missed appointment that can’t be made again” (163). These may reference other popular manifestations of death as keeping accounts of all living beings and squaring them away when their time is up. Additionally, when Diego references a hundred years as a long span of time, she retorts, “But I can take a broader view” (204), indicating that she is ancient and, possibly, timeless. As such, part of facing this totalitarian regime will require citizens to face death itself.

Unable to face death themselves, desperate citizens seek support from the existing institutions – the courts and the church– and find these efforts fruitless. The judge offers to turn in his own daughter to the authorities based on his responsibility to uphold the law, and the priest, when a voice of one of his parishioners calls to him for sanctuary, is
given the stage direction to “quicken his steps” (169) to avoid interacting with them. As such, Camus does not advocate that a solution can be found through either of these existing structures. Though this would cause him some unfavorable press at the time, specifically from the devoutly Catholic Marcel who took offense to the church’s presentation as complicit in totalitarian takeovers, Camus brushed off these concerns, stating, “I did not seek to flatter anyone in writing The State of Siege” (qtd. in Rhein 69).

Soon, Diego arrives on the scene, clad in a Plague doctor’s uniform, and bemoans the state of the city. He encourages the townsfolk, listed in the script as the Chorus, to vocalize their dissatisfaction, but they express futility: “What is the use of crying out? No longer have our woman the flowerlike faces that set our hearts aflame with desire, and Spain is Spain no longer. Line up! Line up! Keep your places! No joy is left in life…” (187). From this, Diego realizes that he must face the Plague without reinforcements: “Then let’s have it out, you and I. The stronger of us two will kill the other” (187). The Plague retaliates against his threat by sending his officers after Diego, marking him with the black star and infecting him with the plague. Now, Diego’s fate is directly tied to the populace. As such, as the only named character in the crowd, Diego’s choices may inform how Camus wishes totalitarianism to be addressed.

From this, we can infer that abandonment is not within Camus’ list of acceptable approaches to totalitarianism. Diego initially hopes to escape from Cadiz by boat, but the boatman initially refuses him on the grounds that he may carry the plague and infect other countries. When Diego tries to bribe him, the Secretary enters and refuses to let him leave, professing that desertion is “a contingency that’s not provided for. Also, I know you better, you won’t desert your post” (202). Instead, the two begin a verbal
sparring match. The secretary proclaims that Diego’s defiance of her will is ultimately futile; she will find everyone eventually and cross their names off in her ledger: “Now and then we overlook someone. But he always ends up by giving himself away, sooner or later. When the man reaches the age of a hundred he can’t help bragging about it—fool that he is! Then it gets into the newspapers. It’s only a question of time” (204).

Knowing that this is true, Diego concedes that he will be killed eventually, but notes that his power as an individual grants him unique status:

DIEGO: … It’s easier working on whole generations, at an office table, in silence and with a restful smell of ink. But a single man, that’s another story; he can upset your applecart. He cries aloud his joys and griefs. And as long as I live I shall go on shattering your beautiful new order with the cries that rise to my lips.

Yes, I resist you, I resist you with all the energy that’s in me” (205).

The Secretary begins to laugh at Diego’s monologue, so, in fit of rage, he slaps her across the face. After he does so, the marks of the plague begin disappearing. The allegory is clear. In order to successfully overcome the plague, or totalitarianism, one must be willing to act independently of the crowd and confront the possibility of death fearlessly. One cannot avoid the inevitability of death, but one can reaffirm one’s commitment to life:

THE SECRETARY: Tell me, are you still afraid?

DIEGO: No.

THE SECRETARY: Then I can’t do anything to harm you. That, too, is down in the regulations. But I don’t mind telling you it’s the first time I’m glad about that loophole in our code. (207)
Camus affirmed this reading in subsequent interviews, stating, “No spectator can in good faith doubt that this play takes sides with the individual, in that which is noble in the flesh, in short, with terrestrial love, against the abstractions and the terrors of the totalitarian state, whether this be Russian, German, or Spanish” (qtd. in Rhein 69). Diego’s confrontations should be, in Camus’ eyes, how to most justly face oppressive forces: by not appealing to higher orders, but by facing the possibility of death head-on and demanding one’s freedom.

Revitalized, Diego returns to the city and delivers a monologue to the townsfolk to inspire revolt:

“Rub out the stars. [The stars are obliterated.] Open the windows. [Windows are opened.] Group the sick together. [The crowd obeys.] Make more space for them. Good. Now stop being frightened; that’s the one condition of deliverance. Let all of you who can, rise to their feet. Why are you cowering like that? Hold up your heads; the hour of pride has struck. Throw away your gags and proclaim with me that you have stopped being afraid. [Raising his arm] O spirit of revolt, glory of the people, give these gagged men and women the power of your voice!” (209).

By giving this monologue to his protagonist, Camus solidifies his solution to totalitarianism in the allegory. He advocates for a populace that will relinquish their fear of death in order to wrench control back from institutions that place limits on their freedom.

Camus recognizes that this behavior, however, may require sacrifice; facing death does not mean that one will always avoid it. When Diego goes to confront the Plague
directly, he discovers that Victoria has been taken hostage and marked for death. The Plague offers him a deal: the opportunity to either die in Victoria’s stead or for the two of them to escape the city, provided that they leave the Plague to continue to “make [his] own terms with this city” (220). Having already rejected the option of abandonment, Diego refuses to leave and instead accepts the bargain: he will take Victoria’s place. However, the Secretary is touched by Diego’s defiance and decides to part ways with the Plague. Deflated and dissatisfied with a population that will not fall in line, the Plague decides to take his reign of terror to a more complicit population: “If you want to know the way I feel about it, I’ll say a dead man is refreshing enough, but he’s not remunerative. Not nearly so rewarding as a slave” (227). He relinquishes control and exits the stage, leaving Diego to die. In this act of defiance, the city is saved.

According to Phillip Rhein, “It is Camus’ avowed intention to create a modern myth which contains not only his analysis and criticism of twentieth-century society but also a possible solution to the problems he raises” (69). In this case, the solution is a relatively simplistic one. Diego triumphs through his individualism: by saying “no” to totalitarian demands and taking on the consequences for doing so, and so may humanity in the face of real dictatorships.

The original production for State of Siege, under the direction, and lead acting, of Jean-Louis Barrault, premiered at the Théâtre Marigny in October of 1948 to fairly unanimous critical reviews. According to Camus, “there was no dissenting voice among the critics. Truly, few plays have ever enjoyed such a unanimous slashing” (“Author’s Preface”, viii). It enjoyed a short run of twenty-three performances before closing, citing negative press.
The play continues to receive similar feedback in its contemporary incarnations. Though it would see occasional performances in smaller venues throughout the world, it would take almost seventy years before the play would be produced again in Paris. In 2017, the Théâtre de la Ville would stage the first Parisian revival of *State of Siege*, under the direction of Emmanuel Demarcy-Mota. The production would tour in the United States in the fall of the same year, using projected English subtitles for non-Francophone audiences. Curiously, while the stylistic elements of this production received positive feedback from reviewers, the production still faced harsh evaluations from critics.

Notably, reviewers did not generally extend blame to the director. Alexis Soloski of *The New York Times* slammed the production, lamenting that “not even Mr. Demarcy-Mota’s stylish interventions can make *State of Siege* anything more than a hollow allegory” (Soloski), and WBUR’s Christopher Wallenberg praised Demarcy-Mota for expertly “employing swelling music, video projections and striking visual tableaus,” but concluded that the production was burdened by the “limitations of Camus' thinly-rendered characters and rickety, bare-bones dramaturgy” (Wallenberg). Ann Arbor theatre critic Jenn McKee expressed that she “felt as though Théâtre de la Ville had, from a production standpoint, done pretty much everything it could with Camus’ ham-fisted postwar tale. But it was hard to escape the sense that while the production aims to be a call to arms against tyranny, it ultimately lacks a beating heart, or a point of genuine human connection…” (McKee). From this, all reviewers point fingers at the source material, rather than the director’s conception of it.

What about the source material could be contributing to this assessment? Though his play shows some minor stylistic changes since he began writing, *State of Siege*
primarily utilizes many of the same dramaturgical strategies that Camus employed in *Caligula*. These choices, while beneficial for showcasing an argument and a didactic solution to a problem, also create a similar distancing effect that may impede audience members from developing emotional investment in the characters.

Camus’ dramaturgy has shown growth since his first productions. The script for *State of Siege* does notably employ greater use of sound and light than his previous productions. For example, the opening of the show includes stage directions that call for “a musical overture built around a theme recalling the sound of an air-raid siren” and the sound in which “a clock strikes four” (State of Siege 137). Still, as in *Caligula*, Camus relies primarily on dialogue to deliver the emotional content of the play. He still utilizes minimal stage directions – apart from falling down – and uses monologues in order to express the impact of the Plague’s rule on the populace. As Sonnenfeld points out, “The effects of the plague on the city are not dramatized on the stage; they are described by the chorus” (119).

Following his desire to create a modern myth and harkening back to his love of Greek tragedy, Camus borrows a strategy from his ancient predecessor and employs a Greek chorus throughout the play. The chorus speaks entirely in unison, usually to deliver a monologue that spans multiple pages about the emotional impact of the Plague’s rule:

CHORUS: “Alas! Alas! The last gate is shut, and we are locked up together, we and the Plague. We can hear nothing any more and henceforth the sea is out of reach. Sorrow is our companion, we can only turn in dreary circles within this beleaguered city, cut off from the sounds of leaves and waters, prisoned behind
tall, smooth gates. So now, beset with howling crowds, Cadiz will become a huge, red-and-black arena in which ritual murders are to be enacted. Brothers, our plight is surely greater than our sin; we did not deserve this imprisonment. True, our hearts were not innocent, still we greatly loved the world of nature and its summers—surely that might have saved us from this doom…”

This technique does establish parity between the play and those of the theatrical tradition Camus admires; by continuing to use elements from Greek drama, the mythic, didactic quality of the play is emphasized. However, it is also off-putting to modern audiences to hear a group of actors recite full monologues in complete unison. Rather than creating a sense of ceremony, the effect is robotic; the notion that an entire crowd has memorized a common speech is unlikely, thus making the impact more cerebral and less relatable, creating a psychological distance between the content and the audience members. This perhaps explains critical receptions such as Wallenberg’s, which claimed, “…‘The State of Siege’ is ultimately more of a poetic and symbolic philosophical argument than a fully realized work of drama” (Wallenberg).

Camus’ specific choices in dialogue too may contribute to the play’s distancing effect. While cries of “Alas! Alas!” would be common in the ancient Greek dramas that Camus enjoys, the verbiage is unheard of in contemporary conversation. As such, it may be challenging for audience members, expecting to see a play reminiscent of its time (1948), to develop an authentic connection with the characters. Sonnefeld echoes this sentiment, asserting, “To write a good play, a dramatist must create effective dialogue; and this is precisely what Camus was unable to do because he continually transported
novelistic techniques into the theatre” (123). The language does correspond with structures common in Greek myth, but it does so at the expense of modern accessibility.

Camus’ characterization also suffers in other ways. *State of Siege* employs several stock characters; only three (Diego, Victoria, and Nada) are given first names, and the rest are identified purely by their professional title (An Astrologer, The Judge, A Priest, A Fisherman). This act of depersonalized naming strips the characters of any potential for rounded development. None of them develop distinct personalities or motivations; each becomes an oversimplified stereotype that feeds into the allegory. In absence of a name, and thereby a developed backstory, Camus’ characters become hollow and identifiable only based their allegorical function.

For example, early in the play, in response to the comet, many of the unnamed characters provide a hackneyed piece of advice on how the citizens of Cadiz should greet the phenomenon of the comet:

ASTROLOGER: “Ladies and gentlemen, let me cast your horoscopes. The past, present, and the future guaranteed by the fixed stars. The *fixed* stars, mind you! [Aside] For, if comets take a hand in it, I’ll have to look round for another job” (148).

THE SORCERESS: “Here’s mint and sage, here’s balm and rosemary, saffron, lemon peel, almond paste. Mark my words, these remedies have never been known to fail” (154).

PRIEST: “To church, all of you! Know that the hour of reckoning has come and the ancient doom has fallen on our city. It is the penalty with which God has ever
visited cities that have grown corrupt; thus it is He punishes them for their mortal sin” (153).

Here, each offers advice purely from their professional interest on how to best greet an unfamiliar phenomenon.

This technique is not entirely useless. Oversimplification may be beneficial for reinforcing Camus’ ideology; through not developing them, they become more clearly vehicles for his philosophical message. Just as in Caligula, each can stand for a particular ideology and, based on their interactions with one another, Camus may establish which he believes are strongest based on whether the characters or their arguments survive, as mentioned earlier with the priest’s abandonment of his parishioners. By not characterizing the priest, audience members may focus instead on what he stands for (religious structures) and draw logical conclusions based on how he behaves in the text (in a manner complicit with totalitarianism).

However, while rhetorically strong for establishing the credibility of an idea, this technique of depersonalization is theatrically disengaging, particularly to many modern audiences looking for the opportunity to empathize. In 2017, theatre critic Alexis Soloski would criticize the play as having “a script more invested in moral philosophy than character or plot. It traffics in maxims rather than dialogue” (Soloski).

In addition, choices in the physical design may also contribute to the audience’s inability to invest in the production in the way Camus intended. Camus also failed to consider the impact that his costuming may have on the generalizability of his message. When the plague is first introduced, he is described in the stage directions as someone who is “fat, bald-headed, and wears a sort of uniform on which hangs a medal” (159).
Though not explicitly stated, in the original production, director Jean-Louis Barrault interpreted this description as referring specifically to France’s occupation and provided the Plague’s actor with Nazi emblems, anchoring the production in a very specific manifestation of a totalitarian government (Freeman 92). The decision to use familiar symbols, ones that are publicly recognizable and aligned with a very specific military group, may have unintentionally limited the application of the allegory. Through linking it with one particular manifestation, the character becomes inexorably linked to that manifestation; the plague becomes equated to Nazism specifically, rather than to totalitarianism generally. Bearing no production responsibility for costuming, Camus could not be necessarily be blamed for that explicit linkage, but the decision to give the character a military uniform at all implies a strong connection with whichever country’s military assemblage most closely mirrors the costume. This conclusion is seconded by Sonnenfeld, who, in his review, criticized the decision to make the plague a character at all: “The greatness of Camus’ use of the myth of the plague in the novel lay precisely in the extraordinary variety of associations, religious, literary, and historical, which it summoned up in the reader’s mind. The theatre audience, however, forgets the myth of the plague entirely; on the stage there is a very sarcastic but not unlovable petty bureaucrat always” (Sonnenfeld 119).

Notably, the 2017 adaptation chose to ignore this stage direction altogether with more favorable results. Demarcy-Mota substituted the uniform for a black overcoat, which is linked to no specific culture and thus fairly generalizable. While American reviewers connected the character with “demagoguery” (Wallenberg), “right-wing
extremism” (Soloski), and “a tyrannical authority” (Frankel), none asserted that the plague was representative of a particular historical or contemporary authority.

Though it has never received critical acclaim, Camus’ production is successful in some ways and unsuccessful in others. In creating an allegory and a decisive solution to totalitarianism, his conclusions are rhetorically clear; he has created a thoroughly didactic play. In terms of creating a play that is immersive for audiences, his use of stage direction, dialogue, and costuming comes up short. As McKee notes, it is “in the end, a cerebral play that stirs no feelings is sharply limited in its capacity to provoke and inspire” (McKee). However, as with Exit the King, Eugène Ionesco provides us with the opposite. In Rhinoceros, Ionesco presents readers with a very similar situation (a town overrun by totalitarian influences) and a reverse effect. Due to the way he utilizes staging, characterization, and costuming, his play immerses readers into totalitarian overreach, but avoids providing any clear solution to the problem.
Chapter 7

The Absurd in the Face of Totalitarianism: Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*

Like Camus, Ionesco also had a deeply personal brush with the impact of totalitarianism. In his native Romania, he had experienced the rise of fascist philosophy and watched it overtake his colleagues. In his interview with Claude Bonnefoy, he recalled, “I had made a certain number of friends. And a lot of them – I’m not talking about 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935 – turned to Fascism. Just as today all intellectuals are ‘progressives,’ as they call themselves, because it’s fashionable. At that time, it was fashionable to be on the right” (Bonnefoy 22). As the trend progressed, the justification for totalitarian thought began to pervade university classrooms, including his own philosophy lectures under professor Nae Ionescu, and Ionesco experienced scholarly justification for acts that he found morally impermissible.

Ionesco experienced this shift first-hand while serving as a literary reviewer for the Bucharest newspaper, *Axa*. Although the publication had always leaned to the right, the editors began increasingly to publish articles that showed sympathy to Corneliu Codreanu’s Legionary Movement, better known as the Iron Guard. Much like the National Socialist Party in Germany, the Iron Guard was characterized by extreme nationalism and strong anti-Semitic sentiments, both of which conflicted with Ionesco’s “modernist and cosmopolitan views” (Lupas 87), causing him to resign his position after four editions. (Lupas) Just as Camus had concluded that totalitarianism was unjustified according to his absurdist philosophy, so too did Ionesco.

In his memoir, *Present Past Past Present*, Ionesco commented on the swift turnaround time and relative ease in which his previously steadfast anti-Fascist friends
had succumbed to fascist mentalities. Evoking similar metaphors to Camus, he described the proliferation as a sort of epidemiological affliction: “All my anti-Fascist friends have become absolute, fanatic Fascists because in the beginning they gave in on one little detail. I am well acquainted with this phenomenon: the incubation period has begun; these are the first symptoms. It takes them between three weeks and two months to become part of the system” (qtd. in Lupas 86). Here, Ionesco offers a critique of fascism that mirrors Camus’ criticism of dogma: the absolute, fanatical belief in an unethical system. Ionesco would later expand on and develop this metaphor into the plotline of *Rhinoceros*, his 1960 absurdist play in which the citizens of a small town are overcome with the fictional disease “rhinoceritis.”

It is notable that both Camus and Ionesco chose to represent collectivist thinking as a pandemic. However, while Camus used a literal plague, brought on by a dictator of the same name, Ionesco’s pandemic is significantly more sensationalized. Instead of dying from the infection, all citizens who contract it turn into rhinoceroses.

Using an animal as a symbol also comes with symbolic and theatrical advantages over Camus’ plague. With an infectious disease in the traditional sense, it is challenging to employ symptoms in a way that is visible to an audience, perhaps why Camus resorted to verbalizing the impacts in long monologues and employing the stage direction of “falling over” repeatedly throughout the play. A pandemic of rhinoceroses, however, leaves Ionesco with some distinct sensory advantages. Using a rhinoceros allows for the director to employ sound (panting, charging, roaring) and physical imagery (characters growing horns, the appearance of rhinoceros heads) to show the impact of the pandemic, rather than lecture about it. Because of this, Ionesco can utilize visual and auditory
elements of the stage that would be unavailable to Camus. Moreover, the rhinoceros allows Ionesco’s play to remain anchored in absurdity in a physical way; after all, a rhinoceros is not exactly a domestic creature that one would expect to find in an urban setting. Whereas Camus anchors even his sense of the absurd in dialogue alone, Ionesco brings it to life in tangible representations.

Interestingly, the connection between rhinoceroses and pandemic fascism developed in Ionesco’s mind long before the play was in production. In one of his journals, which he would post-date with the notation “around 1940,” he wrote, “The police are rhinoceroses. The judges are rhinoceroses. You are the only man among the rhinoceroses. The rhinoceroses wonder how the world could have been led by men. You yourself wonder: Is it true that the world was led by men?” (Henry). These experiences likely influenced development of the metaphor used in the play; after all, according to Dobrez, “Ionesco’s sense of hopelessness in Bucharest is exactly Bérenger’s situation, and it mirrors, as Ionesco points out, the difficulty of standing firm even in one’s own mind against the collective and its dominant ideologies.” (161-162). In later interviews, Ionesco himself relayed, “People allow themselves suddenly to be invaded by a new religion, a doctrine, a fanaticism… At such moments we witness a veritable mental mutation. I don’t know if you have noticed it, but when people no longer share your opinions, when you can no longer make yourself understood by them, one has the impression of being confronted with monsters – rhinos, for example.” (qtd. in Esslin 181-182).

_Rhinoceros_ is the second of Ionesco’s Bérenger plays. In this incarnation, Ionesco’s everyman is a spiritless dullard, described as “unshaven and hatless, with
unkempt and creased clothes” and “everything about him indicates negligence” 
(Rhinoceros 4). In the opening scene, he is lunching at a café with his friend Jean, and 
the stage directions further emphasize his disheveled nature; Ionesco indicates that he 
“seems weary, half-asleep; from time to time he yawns” (Rhinoceros 4). When 
juxtaposed with his friend and lunchtime companion Jean, described as “very fastidiously 
dressed” and with shoes that are “yellow and well-polished,” the impression given to the 
audience is that Bérenger carries a lower of level social influence. Unlike Camus’ 
characterization of Diego and Nada in the Prologue in State of Siege, which relies entirely 
on dialogue, this impression is immediate, relying on their physical juxtaposition to 
develop their characters. When Bérenger later delivers an apology for running late for 
their meal and Jean begins criticizing his friend’s careless lifestyle, the dialogue 
emphasizes a conclusion that many will have already drawn from their impression of his 
costuming. Thus, the visuals and dialogue compliment one another, rather than, in 
Camus’ case, remaining largely disconnected.

In the midst of their conversation, they are interrupted by the approach of the first 
rhinoceros. In this introduction, too, Ionesco strays away from narrative retellings and 
utilizes sound to impart the first impression of the pandemic. He includes the stage 
direction: “[At this moment a noise is heard, far off, but swiftly approaching of a beast 
panting in its headlong course, and of a long trumpeting]” (7). The decision to use 
noise, rather than a physical representation, to introduce the rhinoceros allows the 
audience to utilize imagination and conjure up their own images of what could be behind 
the predatory sound. Much as in a horror film in which the monster does not appear on 
screen, audience members are given the freedom to interpret the bestial sounds and
mentally impose features that they find especially terrifying. Moreover, the idea that a rhinoceros is an imposition can be conveyed without actors needing to verbalize that it inconveniences them. As the noise begins to increase in volume, Jean too must shout to be heard across the table; the stage direction indicates that he is “almost shouting to make himself heard above the noise, which he has not been conscious of” (8). Audience members can pick up on the discomposure that comes with having to shout over loud noises, so further verbal explanations are unnecessary.

In his analysis of the play, James Mills commented on this stylistic technique, stating, “Like Antonin Artaud, the avant-garde critic whom he emulated, Ionesco sought to substitute a new symbolic language, or language in space and movement, for the spoken one” (qtd. in Bennett 157). Consistently throughout the play, sound and visuals allow audience members to gain further impressions about the spread of rhinoceritis. In Act I, a rhinoceros races through the town offstage, conveyed entirely through “a sound of rapid galloping” (Rhinoceros 24). As it stampedes by, two characters fall over in their chairs, presumably at the sight of it, while a waitress drops a tray, “breaking the glasses” (25). The destruction includes some casualties, namely a housewife’s cat. Ionesco includes a stage direction in which “a piteous mewing is heard, then an equally piteous cry of a woman” (26). When she arrives on stage, cradling the corpse, she merely confirms what the audience has already determined: the rhinoceros has trampled her cat to death. These effects intensify as the play progresses. In Act III, the destruction has escalated from trampled cats to murder; during one of the rampages, a rhinoceros “emerges from the orchestra pit under the window and passes swiftly, left to right” with a boatman impaled on the front of his horn (86).
Though the rhinoceroses cause great, and intensifying, destruction all over town, there are remarkably few instances in which characters discuss the effects at length; they are mostly showcased physically or audibly, thereby not requiring dialogue. In a review of the 2002 Berkley production, directed by Barbara Damashek, critic Telory W. Davies noted, “With each rhino entrance, at least one prop is dropped, spilled, or broken to mark the disruption” (qtd. in Bennett 97).

Much like Camus in *State of Siege*, Ionesco also uses his characters symbolically to support his pandemic theme. In both plays, townsfolk are overtaken by rhinoceritis and, one by one, begin to transform. Unlike *State of Siege*, however, the casualties are not an anonymous herd, but named characters. The pandemic initially takes some of Bérenger’s minor acquaintances, including the husband of Mrs. Boeuf. As it spreads, though, it begins to infect his closest friends. While Camus’ use of the Greek chorus provides an intellectual understanding that humans can succumb to totalitarian thinking, Ionesco’s is much more personal. It shows that the attitude cannot only happen theoretically; it can happen to those we know and possibly even ourselves.

The first of Bérenger’s friends to turn is Jean, who is incidentally the only one to transform on stage. At the beginning of Act II, Jean is bedridden, having come down with a cough. Bérenger arrives to take care of him. As Bérenger examines his friend, he notices that Jean is missing many of the symptoms of a traditional illness. For example, he takes Jean’s pulse and discovers that it is normal (62). However, Bérenger notes that Jean is beginning to turn a shade of green, and stage directions indicate that his voice is becoming “even hoarser” (61). Even stranger, Jean is developing a bump on his head:
JEAN: That’s the limit! [Touching his forehead.] I can feel something. I’m going to have a look, in the bathroom. [He gets up abruptly and goes to the bathroom. Bérenger watches him as he goes. Then, from the bathroom:] It’s true, I have got a bump. [He comes back; his skin has become greener.] So you see I did knock myself. (61-62)

The stage makeup here physicalizes the ailment in a way that State of Siege does not. The onset is gradual, and stage makeup provides a physical transformation. Each time Jean steps offstage, the makeup gradually increases. This mimics the onset of a real ailment, in that symptoms gradually increase rather than, as in State of Siege, occurring immediately. Moreover, the gradual reveal gives the scene a greater sense of tension, thus allowing audience members to connect to the situation in a visceral way. The affliction is not purely theoretical; it is observable.

As Jean physically changes, so too do his mannerisms. He begins to pace around the room, “like a wild beast in a cage, from one wall to the other” (64). He fiddles with his pyjama top, buttoning and unbuttoning, because he “felt uncomfortable in [his] clothes” (64). His voice too gradually changes and becomes hoarse, to the point at which it is “unrecognizable” (66). As he speaks, his dialogue also begins to reflect a change in mindset from his previous, socially conscious persona:

JEAN: Moral standards! I’m sick of moral standards! We need to go beyond moral standards!

BÉRENGER: What would you put in their place?

JEAN: [still pacing] Nature!

BÉRENGER: Nature?
JEAN: Nature has its own laws. Morality’s against Nature. (67)

The verbiage in this exchange is recognizable to those familiar with fascist rhetoric. It bears a striking resemblance to claims in Mein Kampf, notably that Nature “by no means believes in an equality of the races, but . . . recognizes their higher or lesser value and feels itself obligated to promote the victory of the better and stronger, and demand the subordination of the inferior and weaker in accordance with the eternal will that dominates this universe” (qtd. in Shirer 88). By adding this dialogue over his physical transformation, the audience begins to associate Jean’s totalitarian rhetoric with his changing physical form, for the verbiage and the affliction go hand-in-hand. Thus, Jean’s transformation carries a different resonance than that of Camus’ Greek Chorus. Whereas Ionesco uses makeup, stage directions, and dialogue to convey the full experience of a rhinoceros pandemic, Camus’ plague, whose effects are only relayed in dialogue, is second-hand. Ionesco’s becomes experiential, while Camus’ remains merely theoretical.

Before they turn, each of Bérenger’s other acquaintances also provides a different argument for why becoming a rhinoceros is permissible. For example, Dudard, tolerant to a fault, justifies his position on the rhinoceritis epidemic as seeing both sides of a complex moral issue. He dignifies the rhinoceroses and makes claims that, if the most intelligent among them have capitulated and become rhinoceroses, it must be because they have freely chosen what they consider to be a good argument: “If he was a genuine thinker, as you say, he couldn’t have got carried away. He must have weighted all the pros and cons before deciding” (Rhinoceros 87). When Bérenger screams at the growing crowd of rhinoceroses that he will never join them, Dudard delights at their
movements, saying, “They’re just going round and round the house. They’re playing! Just big babies!” (87)

Dudard’s open-mindedness towards the rhinoceroses provides an opportunity for rhinoceritis to infect his thought process. As Ionesco noted in his own companions when they “gave in on one little detail,” he begins to see their life as a plausible option for himself, citing that “certain illnesses are good for you” (76). He eventually exits the stage for his transformation, claiming that it comes only out of a desire to understand the rhinoceros psyche: “…if you’re going to criticize, it’s best to do so from the inside. I’m not going to abandon them. I won’t abandon them” (93). Bérenger mourns his transformation, citing that he was “too good-hearted” (93). From the loss of Dudard, audience members can recognize the danger in the paradox of tolerance; by extending tolerance an intolerant group, one risks assimilating into it.

Bérenger’s co-worker Botard, meanwhile, provides rhetoric consistent with Holocaust deniers. Intensely distrustful, he refuses to accept any evidence that comes second hand. He refuses to believe the recent news stories about increased rhinoceros sightings (“It’s obvious they were just making it up. You put too much trust in these journalists; they don’t care what they invent to sell their wretched newspapers!”) (41), and, when Daisy, Bérenger’s love interest, pipes up that she witnessed a rhinoceros in town, he dismisses her account as mistaken: “Get away with you! And I thought you were a sensible girl!” (41). Botard only concedes to believe in rhinoceroses when he encounters one first-hand; Mrs. Boeuf’s husband makes an appearance outside of his business, looking for his wife. Even then, he becomes convinced that it is a sort of
conspiracy, and he rails against the transformations: “I’ll let you know the purpose and the meaning of this whole plot! I’ll unmask the perpetrators!” (54).

Based on his public outcry, it would seem that Botard should be immune to rhinoceritis. However, in Act II, Daisy reveals that this is not the case:

DAISY: I’ve got some news for you: Botard’s a rhinoceros!

DUDARD: Well, well!

BÉRENGER: I don’t believe it. He was against it. You must be mistaken. He protested. Dudard has just been telling me. Isn’t that so, Dudard?

DUDARD: That is so.

DAISY: I know he was against it. But it didn’t stop him turning twenty-four hours after Mr. Papillon.

DUDARD: Well, he must have changed his mind! Everybody has the right to do that. (88)

Botard’s transformation emphasizes that even those who were most opposed to the idea of rhinoceroses, or totalitarianism, can potentially capitulate.

Eventually, only Bérenger and Daisy remain: the last living humans. Bérenger looks to her to help him repopulate the planet, now that everyone else has turned, but she rejects the proposition, revealing that she has no interest in ever having children because “it’s a bore” (102). It is then revealed that she is attracted to the idea of becoming a rhinoceros because of the creature’s immense power: “I feel a bit ashamed of what you call love – this morbid feeling, this male weakness. And female, too. It doesn’t compare with the ardour and the tremendous energy emanating from all these creatures around us” (103). Bérenger too acknowledges this appeal, relaying “You think they’re stronger than
me, stronger than us. Maybe they are” (104). Daisy most closely resembles individuals who become attracted to movements because, rather than authentically embracing their message, doing so gives them a sense of influence and supremacy.

The use of sound and imagery becomes especially apparent in this final scene of the play. As Daisy considers abandoning Bérenger, the set begins to undergo a transformation. The rhinoceros noises, which at the beginning of the play were decidedly bestial, begin to take on a more sonorous quality:

DAISY: Listen, they’re singing!

BÉRENGER: They’re not singing, they’re roaring.

DAISY: They’re singing.

BÉRENGER: They’re roaring, I tell you. (104)

The stage direction in this moment indicates that the sounds “have become melodious” (104). This allows Ionesco to convey through auditory means that becoming a rhinoceros has become palatable for Daisy and no longer seems undesirable.

When Daisy decides to leave him, Bérenger realizes in this scene that the city is now entirely populated by rhinoceroses and that he is the only human left. During his monologue, he searches for old pictures of himself. He finds three in a drawer and places them on the wall, juxtaposing them with the mounted rhinoceros heads that have, according to the stage directions, started appearing midway through the act:

[When he hangs the pictures one sees that they are of an old man, a huge woman, and another man. The ugliness of these pictures is in contrast to the rhinoceros heads which have become very beautiful. Bérenger steps back to contemplate the pictures.]
BÉRENGER: I’m not good looking, I’m not good looking. (106)

From the descriptions of the pictures, the audience can quickly determine that none of these photos literally depict Bérenger, given the age and gender described. However, by identifying himself in the photos and distinguishing himself from the rhinoceros head, he describes a kinship with them that is missing from trophy: a kinship of species. Thus, without having to verbally spell out the connection, the audience is able to quickly determine that Bérenger is speaking for those who have retained their humanity in the face of rhinoceroses, or collectivist, takeover. The inclusion of these props broadens the generalizability of the symbol; it is not a matter of Bérenger specifically vs. the rhinoceroses and collectivist thinking, but of all humanity vs. rhinoceroses and collectivist thinking. Moreover, by adding the dialogue “I’m not good looking,” the audience can see how Bérenger too is beginning to doubt the appeal of remaining a human.

At the conclusion, Bérenger breaks down and delivers a soliloquy in which he mourns humanity and determines that, though he is tempted to turn into a rhinoceros and join the others, he knows he will not:

BÉRENGER: … I’ve gone past changing. I want to, I really do, but I can’t, I just can’t. I can’t stand the sight of me. I’m too ashamed! [He turns his back on the mirror.] I’m so ugly! People who try to hang on to their individuality always come to a bad end! [He suddenly snaps out of it.] Oh well, too bad! I’ll take on the whole of them! I’ll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I’m the last man left, and I’m staying that way until the end. I’m not capitulating!” (107).
Ionesco ends the scene simply: with a stage direction for “CURTAIN” (107). While Bérenger delivers a rousing speech on individuality, it is unclear whether the speech is successful, whether his actions will impact the other rhinoceroses, or how even he intends to maintain his individuality. Ionesco has provided the problem, but he has delivered no solution. This is consistent with his self-proclaimed theatrical philosophy: “…to deliver a message to the world, to wish to direct is course, to save it, is the business of the founders of religions, of the moralists or the politicians… A playwright simply writes plays, in which he can offer only a testimony, not a didactic message…Any work which was ideological and nothing else would be pointless…” (qtd. in Esslin 129).

Though it had been staged in Düsseldorf a few months earlier, Rhinoceros’ Parisian premiere came in January 1960 at the Odeon Theatre, coincidentally also under the directorial authority of Jean-Louis Barrault, the director who had first staged State of Siege. The production met with rave reviews that praised the production for its “triumph is in the delicate combination of horror and whimsy” (Fowlie 44). Jean Vigneron of La Croix described the production as “a completely clear work, with its own limpid symbolism, all the more powerful for being accessible and all the greater because everyone can grasp its meaning” (qtd. in Bonnefoy 180).

Having been translated into English immediately, it was subsequently produced in multiple theatres abroad, including a London production in April of 1960 starring Sir Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles and a 1961 Broadway adaptation with Zero Mostel. Critics such as Deborah Gaensbauer hypothesize that the play’s success was “due in part to its accessible message and also to a growing acceptance of the theater of the absurd” (58).
Some critics, however, criticized the play for describing a problem, but offering no solutions as to how to deal with it. To this, Ionesco responded, “But I never meant to offer a solution. I simply meant to show how a mutation is possible in collective thought, to show how it comes about. I was quite simply, phenomenologically, describing the process of a collective transformation” (Bonnefoy 70).

If this was his aim, his choice in staging was consistent with it. Ionesco provides his audience with a fully sensory experience of succumbing to totalitarian thought without any hints of a resolution.
Concluding Remarks

When questioned specifically about Sartre and Camus’ respective representations of the absurd, Ionesco replied, “I have the feeling that these writers – who are serious and important – were talking about absurdity and death, but that they never really lived these themes, that they did not feel them within themselves in an almost irrational, visceral way, that all this was not deeply inscribed in their language. With them it was still rhetoric, eloquence. With Adamov and Beckett, it really is a very naked reality that is conveyed through the apparent dislocation of language. What once looked like the dislocation of language now seems very clear to us…” (Bonnefoy 122 – 123).

From this, we may perhaps infer that Ionesco was fully cognizant of both his own stylistic choices and those of Camus; he could recognize the linguistic difference between works that were merely “talking about,” or proselytizing about, the absurd (Caligula and State of Siege) and ones that attempted to make it a “very naked reality” (Exit the King and Rhinoceros) for the audience. His use of physical movement, auditory cues, and careful staging aids his success at creating the latter. As for Camus, his use of dialogue as a crutch betrays his primary background as a philosopher: a role where telling, rather than showing, is commonplace. While his message is certainly imparted in each of his plays, perhaps taking a cue out of Ionesco’s book and using the physical space of the stage would have saved him a barrage of criticism about the hollowness of State of Siege.

Then again, the chance of Camus changing his style would have been highly unlikely, for, in his own words, “I have the misfortune of liking only one type of play (‘Author’s Preface’ x). Camus is nothing if not self-aware.
Works Cited


www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/JamesDilemmaOfDeterminism.html


