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The Language of Sense, Common-Sense and Nonsense

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Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957) was a Polish painter and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, son of a law professor and a graphic artist. In 1948 he made his debut at the First Modern Art Exhibition in Cracow. He worked as a teaching assistant at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, where he established the Self-Instruction Group (Grupa Samokształceniowa), which included Andrzej Wajda, Przemysław Bryłański and others. His emergence manifested opposition against the aesthetics of colourist art. Wróblewski also did art criticism; he published in *Przegląd Artystyczny*, *Twórczość*, and *Gazeta Krakowska*.

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Introduction

The articles collected in this volume are based upon a firm intellectual assumption postulating that the cognitive categories of sense, common-sense and non-sense are also cultural constructs being perpetuated and (re)produced in numerous artworks. From this perspective, the publication aims to create a forum of academic dialogue engaging the heteroglossia of multidisciplinary and trans-cultural voices whose intellectual *modus operandi* is the quest for unravelling the hermeneutic dilemmas implicit in the languages of (non)sense and disguised as philosophical, literary and artistic insights into the nature of cultural meaningfulness in the textual as well as scopic "regimes" of symbolic reality.

Philosophy and the Absurd

In traditional philosophical inquiries, just to mention Kierkegaard's and Camus' formative insights into the matter, the category of the absurd arises out of the fundamental and ontological disharmony experienced between an individual's search for the elusive meaning and the apparent meaningfulness of the universe. Yet nowadays, scholarly perception and the philosophical interpretation of the absurd seems, as *Guliana di Biase* claims, to have changed: it is no more the adequacy of the world in satisfying our deepest needs which is put in question, but it is these needs themselves that should adapt to a new, individualistic way of conceiving life. The feeling of absurd in our contemporary societies is assimilated to an individual disease: so, in the end, it seems that the individual himself is the problem, not the opacity of the world in which he lives. Hence, in a purely Durkheimian mode of analysis, Di Biase claims that an individualistic society increases the subjective perception of the absurd, while a society motivated by solidarity does the opposite. Since the world can answer to man's demand of meaning only with the

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Philosophers on the Absurd in an Individualistic World

One of the distinctive features of the existentialist philosophy has been to look on the world as being essentially irrational and absurd. The existentialist clinging to an irrational model of reality could be said to have been urged by a coexistence of two contradictory tendencies. The first of these assumes that human beings aspire to some sublime end, encouraged to do so by a belief that the very purpose of life is to produce objects endowed with a long-lasting value. The second tendency is determined by one's having to discover the actual absence of absolute and objective values desperately looked for in the world. The most general conclusion the existentialist philosophy arrives at, for that matter, is that human life is meaningless and human choices are, ultimately, not founded on the dictates of reason. Jean Paul Sartre, representing an atheist branch of existentialism, claims that human existence is absurd because people spend most of their life pursuing a life full of meaning in a meaningless universe that remains indifferent to their will.¹ Unlike the atheist existentialists who would not entrust filling in the void of this meaninglessness to religious ideas, the Christian existentialist Kierkegaard promulgates what he calls a "leap of faith," an event which might be helpful in making us live our existence "authentically."

Another existentialist preoccupied with fundamental absurdity of human life, also a writer to give this subject a more detailed concern, was Albert Camus.

¹ See for instance the famous novel of J. P. Sartre *Nausea*, which recounts the breakdown of the reassuring daily life of Antoine Roquentin, his feeling nauseated as he experiences the absurdity normally hidden by his routines.

In pursuing answers to philosophical questions, Camus restricts his reflection to one's "being in the world", involving the most relevant, intimate aspects of human existence and its relating to the world on a day-to-day basis. Consequently, the experience of absurdity is not inherent to people's consciousness nor to the world itself but it is enacted by man and the world coming together to create specific, powerful, intimate relationships with each other. Hence absurdity would be conceived along the lines of an enforced comparison which links up man's persistent hunting for sense with the "senseless" silence of the world itself. But the real problem to emerge here is not so much the incompatibility of human will and reality as man's insisting on posing the question why the world fails to comply with his rational demand of clarity and truthfulness. The absurdity of this condition therefore resembles a state of *divorce*, as Camus calls it, the dramatic effect of two terms realizing their mutual incompatibility after they have aspired at forming a synthesis with each other. By choosing to call this condition "absurd", Camus also intimates that its successful determination cannot be achieved through intellectual insight. For Camus, acknowledging this fundamental absurdity strikes us as a rather painful illuminative experience as we go about our everyday business. In Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, we read that most of the time people live a monotonous life, but one day: "it happens that the stage-sets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep [...] this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement."² We find the same feeling of frustration, and the same revelatory tension going on an existentialist cognitive experience. In this case, absurdity would reveal itself as the impossibility of finding an objective, coherent foundation of knowledge distilled from the proclivities of an internal point of view. "This world I can touch" – we read in *The Myth of Sisyphus* – "and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to size the self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping thorough my fingers [...]. This very heart which is mine will for ever remain indefinable to me. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled."³ The fundamental question posed by Camus is whether this plain consciousness of the absurd is a condition one could simply go on living with. Hence the Sisyphus dilemma: is life worth being lived in the first place? If not, is suicide the only solution

² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), p. 8.

³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 21.

to the absurdity of life?⁴ Camus's answer to this question does not leave room for nihilism. The writer claims that choosing what he calls the suicide option would be as wrong a thing to do as turning the blind eye on the inevitable, as it seems, absurdity ingrain itself in every human action. To choose suicide would only mean to surrender to absurdity, and such an instance of pure negativity would, clearly, not be the case in point.

According to Camus, the only way to save oneself from living a senseless life would be to keep reminding oneself of its brevity and, consequently, to abandon all our clinging to our petty desires, hopes of illusory, superficial self-fulfilment. Such an attitude in fact is not a mere negation but an instance of clearing the ground for what really matters. In this sense, the acceptance of death as the last word in the matter of purposefulness of human endeavours is but a beginning of a process of self-liberation. What should come first in such a case would be one's renouncing of all aspiration to attain infinite, superior freedom, which, in turn, should result in acquiring of a sense of life existing in its own right. Yet, the recognition of this firm extraneousness does not imply that we should restrain ourselves from action. On the contrary, the awareness of there being life running a course on its own should encourage us to use all the possibilities available to us to fully commit ourselves to a social cause. "Sisyphus" – writes Camus – "reaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and rises 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."⁵ To sum up, the solution Camus gives to the problem of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is the developing of a consciousness that oscillates between suicide and hope; this is the way chosen by the absurd hero Sisyphus, who resumes his task being aware of the futility of the effects of his effort, not expecting to receive any metaphysical consolation from anybody.⁶

⁴ According to Homer, Sisyphus betrayed the secrets of the gods to mortal men; for this the gods condemned him to push a huge stone to the top of a hill, but here the stone rolled all the way down to the bottom, so Sisyphus had to begin his task again, for eternity. The myth serves as a bleak metaphor for the meaninglessness of human existence.

⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 91.

⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 6. Camus considers hope as a "fatal evasion" from the absurd, and assimilates it to Pascal's *divertissement*: hope would be the "trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it."

In his later works, Camus worked toward redirecting his philosophy of the solitary self-consciousness of absurdity into a philosophy produced in a more compassionate vein; as we read in his *Carnets 1942-1951*, "the end of the movement of absurdity, of rebellion [...] is compassion [...] that is to say, in the last analysis, love."⁷ This new attitude is fully developed in Camus's most important philosophical work, *The Rebel*. In this work the absurd hero is no more the solitary Sisyphus but Prometheus, the Titan who defies God's will and sacrifices himself for the sake of humanity. Being aware of the anguishing consequences of sympathizing with the human race, Prometheus nevertheless chooses to identify himself with the suffering of others. He allows as it were for compassion to provide the inner meaning for his gesture of rebellion. In Camus's terms, rebellion is meaningless unless it is accompanied by solidarity, and solidarity is meaningless unless it is attested by rebellion. The true rebel fights and works for the benefit of others, making common good his private concern. Finally, the rebel discloses the human nature in its "complete" truth, which engenders solidarity as the very essence of self-consciousness. What he means by solidarity, in turn, is a caring *engagement* with suffering people, which seems to be his last word in the matter of absurdity. Camus's philosophical ideas then translated into a more politically-engaged writing, in which the author would show an unrelenting concern for the social situation in his native, the post-war, Algeria.

The discussion on the absurd continued into the decades that followed the prime of Camus's fame. Sought as a classic existentialist theme, absurdity attracted the attention of writers such as Thomas Nagel and Peter Singer, who resolved to polemicalise with Camus. In an essay entitled *The Absurd*, Thomas Nagel argues that what Camus says about the absurd is essentially true: "most people feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually."⁸ Nonetheless, Nagel claims that Camus's discussion of absurdity is incomplete, because he failed to explain *why* life is absurd. According to Nagel, "what we say to convey the absurdity of our lives often has to do with space and time: we are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one; we will be dead any minute. But of course none of these evident facts can be what makes life absurd, if it is absurd. For suppose we lived forever; would not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity?"⁹

⁷ Albert Camus, *Carnets 1942-1951*, trans. Philip Thody (London: Hamilton, 1966), p. 103.

⁸ Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 11.

⁹ Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 12.

The same, writes Nagel, could be said of our purposes: if we gave significance only to those actions and interests which we think will last eternally, we would have to conclude that everything we do now is absurd, since all our interests and purposes fade into insignificance when compared, for example, with the history of the universe. Besides, we cannot tell what the significance of our purposes is when we look at them from a perspective of a million of years from now on. Consequently, we lack what could be called an atemporal *eternal justification* for our relative, "temporally limited" significance.

Nagel also seems to be dissatisfied with Camus's failing to account for the significance of death in his conception of the absurd – since death does not seem to strengthen the "chains of justification" which support our actions. "One studies and works to earn money to pay for clothing, housing, entertainment, food, to sustain oneself from year to year, perhaps to support a family and pursue a career – but what is final end? All of this is an elaborate journey leading nowhere."¹⁰ Nagel suggests that it is wrong to want to determine something like continuity of discrete purposes in terms of some universal justification. "If someone wished to supply a further justification for pursuing all the things in life that are commonly regarded as self-justifying, that justification would have to end somewhere too". Rather than struggling with the question of the *lack of a final justification*, an argument to pre-occupy Camus's attention too much perhaps, it suffices to say that all minor purposes are incomplete, and they therefore do not have to be justified from a meta-physical point of view. Nagel also challenges the Camusian argument of *inadequacy of the world* to provide for our inherent need of clarity and truth. Nagel perceives this problem as being man's internal matter. "There does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unsettle able doubts could not arise. Consequently, the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves". But Nagel does not reject the core of Camus's thought, and many of his thoughts read as if they had a lot in common with those of the French existentialist. "A situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality." A bit further he also writes: "the sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself."¹¹ However, his accounting for this absurdity is different. For him the absurd ensues from, for example,

¹⁰ Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 12.

¹¹ Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 13.

our indiscriminate comparing of situations to which we attach a different degree of importance. "We cannot live without making choices which show that we take some things more seriously than others. Yet we have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous. These two inescapable viewpoints collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd."¹²

The category of seriousness is important here; it is opposed to arbitrariness, and both of these categories correspond to two aspects of the subject cognition, the internal and the external one. Assembled under one consciousness, these two facets, or even points of view maybe, will sometimes find themselves in a state of conflict. Looking at ourselves from the "outside" we might often have to recognise the arbitrary aspect of our decisions and actions which we nonetheless take for granted as being the issue of our will. According to Nagel, it is this capacity to assume an external point of view (when judging our actions) together with the, essentially, subjective character of this capacity is – if we assume a *common* standpoint – what makes our life seem absurd. In other words, in this case, we make use of our subjective dispositions as if they were capable of becoming objectively important reference points for our judgment. Nagel's philosophical judgment on absurdity would be different. His cognitive position wishes to form a basis for a kind of epistemological scepticism, which assumes that we first localise ourselves right in the world which we falsely claim to know very well. Nagel claims, that we only grasp the appearances of the world, and that since we do not have any objective reference to fall back on, we use them roughly to build up a more general system of beliefs. Nagel's claims do not belittle the importance of the more commonsensical regards of philosophical absurdity in question, but accepting them as meaningful in some universal sense would also mean being able to keep an ironic distance to them. Philosophical scepticism would help us to look at our beliefs with a little bit of irony and detachment. Similarly, the position of an individual judgment on the absurd might be figuratively likened to an "evolute" of the curvature of our thoughts and opinions.

Another author to respond to Albert Camus's existentialistic broodings, especially to the Sisyphus suicide dilemma, was Peter Singer, an American writer who made a name for himself as the main theorist of the Animal Rights Movement.¹³ Singer tries to solve the existentialist problems by claiming that life is not about

¹² Nagel, "The Absurd," p. 13.

¹³ P. Singer, "Living to some purpose," in *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), pp. 194-218.

"passively judging whether life is or is not worth living, but of consciously choosing a way of living that is worth living."¹⁴ In Camus's essay Sisyphus chooses an impractical way of scorning the world and its gods. According to Singer, Sisyphus should have made more effort to make himself useful to others, for he could have carried smaller stones to the top of the hill and built a temple, for example. In other words, he could have erected something endurable which would have made the world more beautiful. Singer also mentions the option of working on one's internal motivation – as he puts it – Sisyphus might have prayed to gods to instil in his heart the desire and enthusiasm to go about his useless endeavours. Singer goes on to claim that one should do more than just choose the prayer option though. Internal work may be very rewarding in that it enhances one's motivation but it is not a solution to the problem of increasing dissatisfaction with which other people respond to their "existential" condition today. Contemporary frustrations may be connected with the rapid development of technology which involves mechanization of working habits. Technology officially gives us facilitation which allows us to live more comfortably but its humdrum repetitiveness stifles our need to enjoy more creativity in what we do. "There is a short cut" – writes Singer – "to overcoming the need for purpose. For the pharmaceutical industry, an existential void is a marketing opportunity."¹⁵ This "void" can no doubt be useful in increasing the sales of tranquilizers and anti-depressants, especially, among women. In the case of men, the "void" winds up competitive attitudes and encourages hyper-active lifestyles, usually resulting in a feeling of loneliness and big susceptibility to stress. This is why modern Sisyphus, a busy individualist, should he hope for his life to make any sense at all, has no choice but to put his life into the service of less egoistic purposes. It seems that Singer's ideas are grounded on an objectivistic conception of ethics. Taking this conception for a basis of a possible solution to the absurdity of life, we might have to fall back on a moral judgment; for it is only by committing ourselves to a moral cause, in the vein signalled by Camus in *The Rebel* perhaps, that the Sisyphus dilemma can be successfully dealt with. Naturally, Singer does not claim that we have to, literally, rebel against anyone, since his rhetoric departs from a romantic version of titanic heroism, a poetic air still present in Camus's writings.

Needles to say, Nagel and Singer offer two different reflexive takes on the absurd. While the first author looks on absurdity as a universal fact, an inevitable effect of our complex cognitive capacity, the latter considers absurdity as the malaise

¹⁴ Singer, "Living to some purpose," p. 195.

¹⁵ Singer, "Living to some purpose," p. 199.

of our times, a symptom of a critical condition that calls for a positive solution. I should not like to favour either of the stances though. Both conceptions of the absurd have something interesting to offer to us and both suggest that we seek for the solutions to our existential problems discussed here by taking a recourse to an open-minded cross-reading of complementary sets of ideas. What is certain in this discussion is that we should not disrespect either of the two theories. Singer is useful in that he encourages us to hope for a positive, practical solution by looking for ways of relating to others, while Nagel does not feel inhibited about appreciating man's "evolution" of thinking and his, or her, individual capacity to act more creatively. Whether we like the idea of individualism taking firm hold of the way we image our lifestyles or not, it is sure that complex forms of individualism are here to stay with us as the dominant philosophy of our times.¹⁶ Hence, the philosophical solutions will have no choice but to fit in with new forms of reflection, streamlined optimally in accordance with contemporary models of self-determination.

¹⁶ Ulrich Beck, "Eigenes Leben," in U. Beck, T. Rautert, U. Erdmann Ziegler eds., *Einiges Leben. Auszüge in die unbekannte Gesellschaft in der wir leben* (München: Beck 1997).

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Stylistic Peculiarities of Non-Sense Writing and the Creation of Comic Effect in the American Experimental Novel

At the beginning of the XX century, various European and American writers placed great emphasis on innovations regarding writing techniques and literary style. They experimented with the new forms of expression in their literary works and started various tendencies that would later be dubbed Modernism.

By the end of the 1930's, the political situation in Europe and United States had made Modernism appear to be an inadequate response to the dangers of worldwide fascism. Literary experimentalism faded from the public view for a period and was kept alive through the 1940's only by isolated visionaries like Kenneth Patchen. In the 1950's the writers were seen as a reaction against the old-fashioned quality of both poetry and prose of its time, and such hovering, near-mystical works as Jack Kerouac's novel *Visions of Gerard* represented a new formal approach to the standard narrative of that era.

The 1960's brought a brief return of the glory days of modernism, and the first grounding of Post-modernism. During the late 1960's, the experimental trend was the mainstream. Metafiction was an important tendency of this period, exemplified most elaborately in the works of John Barth and Jorge Luis Borges. A major touchstone of this era was Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity Rainbow*, which would influence the next generation. Important authors in both short and long prose forms also included Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover.

They played with form, structure, language and style. They would combine the experimental form with total irony and a greater tendency towards humour, which