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The *absurdly* meaningful quest for purpose in *King Lear* and *Hamlet*

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'Shakespeare is Drama' – wrote Victor Hugo in the preface of *Cromwell*.[1] Drama is an artistic form that combines the grotesque with the sublime, the comic with the tragic, the ridiculous with the horrifying. It symbolises literature of modern times – the third era of poetry. As Hugo remarks, this third era of poetry has been preceded by a first era, represented by the epic ode, and by a second era, represented by comedy. William Shakespeare was the acrobat who found a balance between the horror of the grotesque and the beauty of the sublime; he walked on a thin line between tragedy and comedy – he composed the lyrics of early modernity. In *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, Shakespeare portrays the conflict between the human need to come to terms with the absurdity of existence and the excruciating acknowledgment of this impossibility. Thus, he emphasizes the absurdity while suggesting that despite our attempt to overcome it will inevitably prove tragic – our impulse to represent it on stage, to depict the incomprehensible, the ridiculously unconceivable – will not cease to console us, enlighten us and give us purpose.

In his study *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Jan Kott affirms that tragedy and grotesque are very similar in their structure; the grotesque takes over the same themes and presents the same questions of tragedy – what really changes are the answers given.[2] The tragic, in its ultimate outcome, is an admission and confirmation of the absolute. By contrast, the grotesque image lies in an utmost form of conflict, that of order negated, according to Alton K. Robertson.[3] This discord between tragic and grotesque interpretation of human fate

[1] Victor Hugo. Preface of *Cromwell*. Trans. E. H. and A. M. Blackmore. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. p. 30.
[2] Cf. Jan Kott. *Shakespeare Our* Contemporary. London: Methuen, 1965. p. 105.
[3] Cf. Alton Kim Robertson. *The Grotesque Interface: Deformity, Debasement, Dissolution*. Frankfurt: Vervuert, 1996. p. 6.

mirrors the eternal conflict of two philosophies and conflicting attitudes defined by Leszek Kolakowski as the clashing opposition between the priest and the clown.[4] Whereas tragedy is the theatre of priests, grotesque is the theatre of clowns. In arduous times, when the dominating values have been destroyed and it is not possible to appeal to God or history, the clown turns into the main figure of the theatre. In the tragedy of *King Lear*, when Gloucester, supported by Edgar, wants to commit suicide by throwing himself over the cliffs of Dover into the deep blue sea, he finds the vacuum of nothingness; for the cliff does not exist. Kott argues that this scene is characteristic of a peculiar type of theatre: pantomime, which technically only proves successful when performed on a flat and level stage. In this grotesque landscape, sounds affirm their presence by their complete absence; they fulfil the silence, as the cliff fills the emptiness of the stage. Similarly, the scene depicting the attempted suicide is another mime: Gloucester, after his last prayer, falls over to the bottom of the cliff – but there is no height – it was only an illusion. The man stands up while a sigh of disillusion takes over the audience.[5] 'Mime is the performance of symbols'.[6] This is how Shakespeare represents one of the most painful paradoxes of human existence: we are thrown into the world as the protagonists of our own tragedy – yet, we are not even able to commit suicide when we desire to – when our burden becomes too heavy to be carried further and we want to end our infinite suffering. Nevertheless, this impotence, this impossibility of overcoming the absurdity of life needs to be portrayed; it needs to be shown and performed on stage so that we can relieve ourselves from the despairing and somehow ridiculous – weight that we carry. Geoffrey G. Harpham states:

[4] Cf. Leszek Kolakowski. *Marxism and Beyond: On Historical Understanding and Individual Responsibility.* Trans. Jane Zielonko Peel. London: Pall Mall Press, 1969. p. 53.
[5] Cf. Kott, pp. 113-116.
[6] Ibid., p. 117.

> If the grotesque can be compared to anything, it is to paradox. Paradox is a way of turning language against itself by asserting both terms of a contradiction at once. Pursued for its own sake, paradox can seem vulgar or meaningless; it is extremely fatiguing to the mind. But pursued for the sake of wordless truth, it can rend veils and even, like the grotesque, approach the holy.[7]

Harpham goes further by suggesting that because paradox transgresses the norm, it can permeate new and unforeseen spheres of existence, uncovering relations typically belied by syntax. This form of disclosure which brings an unexpected enhancement to our symbolic repertory clarifies our experience of depth: it is nearly identified with the *profound*.[8]

One of the reasons why Hugo describes the grotesque as the symbol of modern art – the antithesis of the classical beauty and propriety of the sublime – could be essentially found in this profoundness, linking paradox to the grotesque. When a spiritual religion took over paganism and created the basis for modern civilisation, Hugo explains, the epic age of the glorious ode was about to end and a new era was coming. Christianity was deemed complete because of its truth – it taught man that he has two lives: one on Earth and one in Heaven. Different morals were introduced and more rigid teachings and rites were established; the advent of Christian faith coincided with and caused the growth of a unique feeling in the human mind, which was unfamiliar to the ancients and incredibly close to our modernity: melancholy. This sentiment emerged flanked by the spirit of meditation and the demon of analysis; there was such a deep transformation affecting the world that the mentality of its inhabitants had to follow through. While several conflicts were taking place and old Europe was being destroyed – man started to feel compassion for humankind and reflected on the cruel irony of life. The Middle Ages grew out the Byzantine empire. At this time, the new

[7] Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *On the Grotesque*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982. pp. 19-20.
[8] Cf. Ibid., p. 20.

Muse became more realistic, for it had to represent existence in its completeness – it had to depict both beauty and terror.

> Christianity has lead poetry to the truth. Like it, the modern Muse must look at things more loftily, and more broadly. She must feel that not everything in creation is 'beautiful' in human terms, that there is ugliness alongside beauty, deforming next door to gracefulness, grotesquery just on the other side of sublimity, evil with goodness, darkness with light.[9]

Art, like Nature, must unite the obscure and the bright, the body and the soul, the magnificent and the absurd. According to Hugo, in this moment a new concept was introduced into poetry: the grotesque.

Before Shakespeare, in the works of Ludovico Ariosto in Italy, Miguel de Cervantes in Spain and François Rabelais in France, sublimity was indeed accompanied by all kinds of grotesquerie. This style arose in the beginning of modernity, along with the birth of comedy as a new genre.[10] In truth, it became a component of art for it was a component of life; it ought to be reproduced because the ugliness that it brought on stage was observed and experienced by humanity every day. The exaggeration of the burdens of existence was a way to be more truthful, to admit the horror, and possibly to overcome it through artistic expression – for beauty was not enough anymore. 'All life is dual, like the Silent of Alcibiades – ugly or beautiful according to the viewer's angle of vision', states Clarence H. Miller in his introduction to *The Praise of Folly*.[11] This masterpiece written by Desiderius Erasmus in 1505 and published for the first time in 1511, has deeply influenced the work of many early modern writers, such as Ariosto, Cervantes, Rabelais and Shakespeare. In

[9] Hugo, p. 23.
[10] Cf. Ibid., pp. 20-30.
[11] Clarence H. Miller. Introduction to *The Praise of Folly*. Desiderius Erasmus. Trans. Clarence H. Miller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. p. xxii.

particular, Shakespeare adopted Erasmus' work as a model for his development of the fool; moreover, for the fool's wise foolery in *King Lear*.

As Hugo points out, comedy and grotesquery were not completely unfamiliar to the ancients – they were just at their nascent state. For modern writers, on the other hand, this style was essential as entertainment for the Romans – it created deformity and horror, comedy and clowning at the same time. In fact, grotesque reveals to be incredibly beneficial, especially in a world where the constant contemplation of beauty was starting to become repetitive. As human beings, notes the French poet, we require a casual break from everything, even from splendour. This is how the grotesque can represent an antithesis, from which is possible to perceive beauty with a fresher perspective. As Hugo reminds us – there is only one kind of beauty; but there are infinite kinds of ugliness. The reason lies in the fact that beauty is regarded merely in its simplest aspect; by contrast, ugliness is a feature of an ample motif developing regardless our capacity of understanding, as it reconciles with the whole of creation, not only with humankind.[12]

Hence, the third era of poetry is dominated by the writer that portrays life in its most realistic essence through drama. When life becomes *dramatic*, Shakespeare *becomes* Drama.

> Drama is characterised by realism; realism arises from a natural combination of two elements, the sublime and the grotesque, which intersect in drama just as they do in life and the created universe. True poetry, complete poetry, consists of a harmony of opposites.[13]

On stage, just as in real life, human beings are individuals who *act* by means of taking an initiative, starting new things and setting off trains of events, as remarked by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*. They are creatures capable of action, which implicates that

[12] Cf. Hugo, pp. 30-34.
[13] Ibid., pp. 33-34.

anything can be expected from them, even the unforeseen; they have the ability to perform what is highly improbable, without necessarily comprehending the implications of it.[14] This essentially proclaims the terrifying irony of the human condition, which, as mentioned earlier, has been reproduced in its early modern connotation by the French popular drama of the sixteenth century. Rabelais – considered by Hugo and François-René de Chateaubriand one of greatest 'geniuses of humanity' of all times – in his *Pantagruel* depicts an underworld which is always associated with the bodily lower stratum, where the bodies and their growth are displayed in a distinctly grotesque form. In Rabelais's world – Mikhail Bakhtin affirms – the grotesque does not merely represent satire; it has a positive and a negative aspect, it is characterised by the richness of the folkloristic sources of its style.[15]

The folklore of melodrama continued, thereafter, in France, where in the nineteenth century the Parisian street Boulevard du Temple was named 'Boulevard du Crime' because of the great number of crime melodramas performed every night in the several theatres situated on the same street. Despite its epithet, the "Boulevard du Crime" was not at all threatening or displeasing – it was indeed one of the most frequented places in Paris. In *Les Enfants du Paradis*, a film realised in 1945 and directed by Marcel Carné, the spectacular flow of the "Boulevard du Crime" appears numerous times and it is central to the beginning and to the end of the story. The film – produced throughout the German occupation of France during World War II – portrays a theatrical life where the events experienced by the characters are linked with those happening on stage; while images of clowns, acrobats, street artists, small criminals and an old vagabond enrich the scenery. *Les Enfants du Paradis* brilliantly captures the reality of life: a world of appearances and disappearances. Erasmus

[14] Cf. Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. pp. 177-178.
[15] Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His* World. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. pp. 307-325.

writes: ‘Now the whole life of mortal men, what is it but a sort of play, in which various persons make their entrances in various costumes and each one plays his own part, until the director gives him his cue to leave the stage?’.[16] In *Les Enfants du Paradis*, Carné approaches the literary topos of beauty through a speech made by the character of Count Edouard de Montray to the charming actress Garance: ‘You are too beautiful to be truly loved. Beauty is an exception, an insult to a world that is ugly. Men rarely love beauty. They pursue it to blot it out, forget it’.[17] It is an acknowledgment of the prevalence of ugliness in this world and of the impelling need of portraying it through art.

The extravagant French melodrama was later represented in the Parisian theatre Grand Guignol, situated in the Pigalle area, which from 1897 until its closure in 1962, has been a symbol of the bloody and the macabre. This “House of Horrors”, was created by the French playwright and secretary of the police commissioner Oscar Metenier, who bought the theatre in order to host his controversial naturalist plays. Grand Guignol literally signifies the ‘big puppet show’ and has borrowed its name from the famous French puppet character Guignol, who represented the voice of the silk workers of Lyon.[18]

While the grotesque style was developing in consonance with the most miscellaneous forms – in line with the various human types and actions it was depicting – the concept of the absurd was becoming central to the philosophical thought of the twentieth century. The word ‘absurd’ derives from the Latin ‘absurdus’, and it means ‘inharmonious, tasteless, foolish’, according to the Oxford English Dictionary.[19] The modern age, mainly distinguished by the

[16] Erasmus, pp. 43-44.
[17] Marcel Carné. *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Paris: Pathè International, 1945. DVD.
[18] Cf. “Grand Guignol History”. Thrillpeddlers, http://www.grandguignol.com/history.htm.
[19] *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Vol. I. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. p. 57.

mechanical process of production and consumption and by world alienation, as stated by Arendt, was leading people to question the deliberate purpose and value of their existence.

> Moreover, even if we admitted that the modern age began with a sudden, inexplicable eclipse of transcendence, of belief in a hereafter, it would by no means follow that this loss threw man back upon the world. The historical evidence, on the contrary, shows that modern men were not thrown back upon this world but upon themselves.[20]

In France, in an intellectual context that was flourishing with new interpretations and representations of the modern human condition, a philosopher who experienced World War II affirmed that the feeling of absurdity can surprise any man at any street-corner. For Albert Camus, as Arnold P. Hinchliffe observes, the absurd is 'an absence of correspondence between the mind's need for unity and the chaos of the world the mind experiences, and the obvious response is either suicide or, in the opposite direction, a leap of faith'.[21] Camus believed that it is necessary for man to accept this feeling, as it could evolve into a starting line for action. It could grant him a sense of freedom and passion. In fact, this sense of absurdity – arose from disillusionment and loss of certitude – can be tackled through a research of one's own meaning and purpose in life. Once one recognises the absurdity, which is also a criticism toward a society considered dishonest and frivolous – and the fact that each individual is part of it, then one should revolt against it.[22]

Art becomes central to this revelation: 'Camus sees a work of art as an absurd phenomenon, but one in which personal awareness is brought out for others to see in the hope of making them aware also, and indicating the common fate'.[23] Although, which kind of fate?

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[20] Arendt writes: "One of the most persistent trends in modern philosophy since Descartes and perhaps its most original contribution to philosophy has been an exclusive concern with the self, as distinguished from the soul or person or man in general, an attempt to reduce all experiences, with the world as well as with other human beings, to experience between man and himself." Arendt, pp. 253-254.
[21] Arnold P. Hinchliffe. *The absurd.* London: Methuen, 1969. p. 36.
[22] Cf. Hinchliffe, pp. 35-37.
[23] Ibid., p. 37.

One of solitude, inevitable death and exile. When the horrific and absurd aspect of life is revealed – Friedrich Nietzsche reminds us in *The Birth of Tragedy* – art becomes the enchantress who comes to rescue and heal, by transforming that disgust towards existence into notions with which it is possible to live.[24] There is no novelty in acknowledging the world as purposeless and chaotic, nevertheless this certainty in the twentieth century gives rise to a new kind of Theatre that will represent an incredible revolution in the history of drama. Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet are the most eminent exponents of what is defined by Martin Esslin – in his work published in 1961 – as the Theatre of the Absurd. In this text, Esslin states that the metaphysical anguish generated by the absurdity of human condition has produced two kinds of plays: the ones written by Sartre and Camus, which brought up new content while using old conventions – and the plays of Theatre of the Absurd, which introduced new content while using new conventions. The abandonment of rational schemes as well as the radical devaluation of language – which implies that what happens on stage often contradicts what the characters say – constitute some of these new conventions employed by the Theatre of the Absurd. The former incorporates devices from the circus, mimes, clowning, verbal nonsense, and the literature of dream and fantasy.[25] It is part of an anti-literary movement of the twentieth century which is expressed in abstract painting through the rejection of 'literary' features in images – or by the 'new novel' in France.

According to Esslin, while the plays written by Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus discuss the absurdity of the human condition, the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd present the same

[24] Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. p. 46.
[25] Cf. Hinchliffe, p. 10.

absurdity with concrete stage images, they *present* it in being. In a musical context, 'absurd' means 'out of harmony'; its definition on the dictionary is 'out of harmony with reason of property; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical. Therefore 'absurd' in the common usage of language is generally identified with 'ridiculous'; but this is not the sense in which Camus adopts the word, and it is not the connotation given by this new kind of Theatre.[26] In the comedy genre, the ridiculous represents some flaw or ugliness which is neither painful or distressing; it is merely a subdivision of the ugly, as stated by Aristotle in *The Poetics*.[27] The absurd as a subject derives from 'confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world', notes Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.[28] It holds meaning in its dialectic with contraries; and can be destructive. On the other hand, the grotesque as a style questions the meaning of existence and highlights its empty essence. Harpham states that the grotesque is found in a co-presence of things that should be left apart, but instead are fused together. These fusions provoke a reaction described clinically by Sigmund Freud as a sense of repulsion; which is somehow different from the sense of estrangement caused by the atmosphere of the absurd.[29] In Shakespeare – Esslin affirms – there is a very strong sense of the emptiness and absurdity of the human condition: elements of a vulgar, spontaneous and in many ways irrational folk-tradition were introduced to literature through his theatre.[30]

> Most of us are too familiar with Shakespeare to notice how rich his plays are in precisely the same type of inverted logical reasoning, false syllogism, free association, and the poetry of real and feigned madness that we find in the plays of Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter. This is not to make any claim that these latter-day playwrights should be compared to Shakespeare, but merely to point out that both the fantastic and the nonsensical have quite a respectable and generally accepted tradition.[31]

[26] Cf. Martin Esslin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Methuen, 2001. pp. 23-25.
[27] Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*. Trans. S. H. Butcher. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1951. p. 21.
[28] Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Trans. Justin O' Brien. London: Penguin Books, 1975. pp. 31-32.
[29] Cf. Harpham, p. 11.
[30] Cf. Esslin, p. 333.
[31] Ibid., p. 332.

The tragedy of *Hamlet* is about not acting, as much as it is about not talking – regardless its more than 3700 lines, affirms Robert Hapgood. The scholar argues that while the characters of this play are dying to speak out their sorrows and thoughts, indeed none of them dares to communicate them. There are times when they are absolutely silent; others when they talk about everything but what they really need to say; sometimes they lie; there are even times when they express themselves darkly, or to the wrong listener, or to someone who is not willing to pay attention to them. For most characters, this 'speech of fire' (*Hamlet* 4.7.166) remains unspoken; for Hamlet, on the contrary, it explodes in an extended form because of its frustration.[32] His every move in revealing the truth about King Hamlet's death is stressed by delay; for fifty lines after discovering who murdered his father, Hamlet does not speak about it. He breaks the silence only after the ghost leaves, with a bizarre and prolonged objection that his father's 'commandment all alone shall live/within the book and volume of my brain' (*Hamlet* 1.5.103-04).[33] Although the main example of arrested speech is the one of Hamlet towards Claudius – this urgency to let his voice be heard is a leading concern of his frequent soliloquy. Moreover, the play-within-a-play is another means through which he attempts to express his speech of fire. As Hapgood highlights, even after his secret has been roughly revealed, Hamlet persists to detain his protests against Claudius. Towards the end, the declaration of what Hamlet really wants to say is arrested:

> You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
> That are but mutes or audience to this act,
> Had I but time – as this fell sergeant Death
>
> Is strict in his arrest – O, I could tell you –

[32] William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. Ed. George Richard Hibbard. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. p. 320.
[33] Ibid., p. 191.

(*Hamlet* 5.2.287-90)[34]

The responsibility to communicate and report Hamlet's cause is then left to Horatio. In this dramaturgy of delay, the postponement of anything that needs to be said also defers anything that needs to be done. There is a feeling that what Hamlet says and does is an alternative for the delayed act of killing the king. More importantly, the dramaturgy of delay strengthens the sense of a world in which direct action and direct speech are immensely arduous, nearly impossible. *Hamlet*'s critique of human action and communication – Hapgood claims – is definitely as complete as that of any other modern literary work. In this sense, Shakespeare's view could be placed in the context of the absurdist theatre.[35]

One of the characteristics of the Absurd, points out Anna Paolucci, is that it holds a "magic" mirror, which alters common things in order to strike the audience with strong emotions, leading to a new evaluation of experience. This extravagant mirror disrupts familiar patterns, and leads us to acknowledge a new dimension and a new kind of communication never considered before. It persists on the language of existential doubt and is created on a structure soaked with scepticism. With the Absurd, the organic integrity of character, which characterised drama from the Greek tragedy until the realistic theatre of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg and Eugene O' Neill – gives away to a fragmented identity. This modern vision of dramatic personality often emerges as an unsolved dichotomy of purpose – and can be best defined as the "dissolution" of character. Its following consequence is the "dissolution" of action. Luigi Pirandello was the first dramatist who delved fully into the implications of this new convention, but, as Paolucci points out, it was

[34] Ibid., p. 351.
[35] Cf. Robert Hapgood. '"Hamlet" Nearly Absurd: The Dramaturgy of Delay'. *The Tulane Drama Review* 9.4 (1965): pp. 139-144.

Shakespeare who opened the way. The best example of this comparison is *Hamlet*. In the outer action of the play, Hamlet appears as an astute Machiavellian realist, a man who can promptly determine the betrayal of his former friends and mislead them into a deceitful sense of security while plotting their death. Moreover, the Hamlet of the outer action makes unreasonable requests of his mother and rejects the girl who wants to marry him, for no evident motivation. It is the same Hamlet who fights and kills at the end of the play – not to fulfil the Ghost's wishes but to defend himself from those who are ready to kill him. Nonetheless, in the soliloquies we find a different Hamlet, one that does not possibly resemble this man of action.

> Again and again, we sense in the Hamlet of the soliloquies a psychological paralysis, an indulgence in philosophical and spiritual meditation – the meaning of life, the place of men in the cosmic picture, the purpose of heroic commitment the questioning of providential design, the self-consciousness of the soul faced with doubt, the alternating rejection and acceptance of a divine dictum, the obsession with logic and rationalization as a substitute for straightforward direct commitment.[36]

We recognise in Hamlet the start of that dissolution of character which is the symbol of the Absurd. His verbalising is a sign of his doubt, remarks Paolucci; it is represented by Hamlet's very first reaction: instead of taking action about what the Ghost has just told him, he takes out his notebook and writes down a Machiavellian consideration: 'That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain' (*Hamlet* 1.5.109).[37] Hamlet thus indicates a turning point in the history of dramatic characterisation. For the first time a character who looks apparently integrated falls apart in gradual stages through a profound oscillation between what *is* and what *seems* to be.[38]

[36] Anne Paolucci. 'Shakespeare and the Genius of the Absurd'. *Comparative Drama* 7.3 (1973): p. 235.
[37] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, p. 191.
[38] Cf. Paolucci, pp. 232-237.

In the latest years, the most outstanding literary confrontation with *Hamlet* is Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, states Reginald A. Foakes. The play illustrates an absurdist perspective on the action of *Hamlet*, where we distance ourselves from the original to see everything happening through the eyes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The protagonists are not aware of the reason why they have been convened to Elsinore or for which intent they are summoned to monitor and report on Hamlet.[39] Nonetheless, they have been quickly informed by Claudius about Hamlet's dissolution: 'We have been briefed. Hamlet's transformation. What do you recollect? Well, he's changed, hasn't he? The exterior and inward man fails to resemble'.[40] If nobody, in the original tragedy, knows who Hamlet is – not even when he is introduced in Tom's Stoppard absurd play – it is because he does not know himself either. According to Alireza Mahdipour, he is an existentialist hero, who is searching for his real, authentic self, and he endures the anguish generated by freedom of choice – which requires engagement and responsibility. The other characters try to unmask and discover the true Hamlet, but he is nowhere to be found. There is no fixed, determined Hamlet – for all the impressions of him that they encounter are their own selves projected to Hamlet. The queen calls him 'My too much changed son' (*Hamle*t 2.2.36) – which is dramatically ironic – because she herself is changed too much.[41] Although Hamlet cannot respond for all this questioning and curious fear that is growing around him; he is too focused on his need to find out the truth – he is motivated 'by his consuming urge to know and to

[39] Cf. Reginald A. Foakes. '"King Lear" and the Displacement of "Hamlet"'. *Huntington Library Quarterly* 50.3 (1987): p. 266.
[40] Tom Stoppard. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. London: Faber and Faber, 1991. pp. 30-31.
[41] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, p. 204.

understand'.[42] He is pervaded by an existentialist quest for "being", or – one might say – for *becoming*, another trademark of the Absurd.[43]

It is established that in Theatre of the Absurd we encounter fools, clowns and ruffians, which are descendants of the *mimus* of the antiquity. However, they could be also found in Shakespeare's grotesque character of the court jester – the Fool in *King Lear*. As Kott remarks, the former is in fact the first fool to be conscious of his position. He uses paradox, logic, and an absurd kind of humour – speaking the language of modern grotesque. 'The same grotesque that exposes the absurdity of apparent reality and of the absolute by means of a universal *reductio ad absurdum*'.[44] Moreover, according to Esslin, in *King Lear* we find the personification of the subconscious part of man in Lear himself.[45] He notes: 'These elements in Shakespeare are merely parts of the whole, embedded in a rich amalgam of the poetic and literary, the popular and the vulgar, but they are present nevertheless'.[46] In the second half of the twentieth century, precisely in the 1960s, there has been a considerable shift in the interpretation of *King Lear*. The impact of the Theatre of Cruelty and the Theatre of the Absurd was leading to new interpretations of the play – writes Foakes – while a new profound awareness about the atrocities of the world wars, concentration camps, totalitarianism and the threat of nuclear annihilation was arising.[47] In 1964, Kott presented his impressive grotesque reading of *King Lear* in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Directly after, Peter Brook realised a theatrical production of the tragedy, and then a film, taking his

[42] George Richard Hibbard, General Introduction to *Hamlet*, p. 63.
[43] Cf. Alireza Mahdipour. 'The existential idea of Self in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A justification for the Renaissance convention of play-within-the-play'. *Journal of Faculties of Letters and Humanities* 49.200 (2006): pp. 136-141.
[44] Kott, p. 137.
[45] Cf. Esslin, p. 333.
[46] Ibid., p. 332.
[47] Cf. Foakes, p. 271.

inspiration – as he himself claims – from Kott's work, which attempts to consider Beckett and Shakespeare as our contemporaries.[48] Kott analyses the different interpretations given to this tragedy since the romantic theatre – to suggest that producers have found it essentially impossible to manage the plot of *King Lear*. Kott concludes that the explanation lies in the philosophical cruelty of the tragedy:

> Neither the romantic, nor the naturalistic theatre was able to show that sort of cruelty; only the new theatre can. In this new theatre there are no characters, and the tragic element has been superseded by the grotesque. The grotesque is more cruel than tragedy.[49]

The exposition of *King Lear* presents a world that is to be devastated. It is a universe that the new theatre, which approaches themes, dilemmas, and conflicts of tragedy – such as – the purpose of existence, human fate, freedom, and the contrast between the absolute and the frail human order, can represent at its best. According to Kott, the grotesque quality of the new theatre can rewrite tragedy in a desecrating style – for the grotesque lies in a tragic world. The most significant affinity between grotesque and tragedy is that in these universes conditions are dictated, imperative and inevitable. Thus, freedom of choice and decision making are part of the forced circumstances, where both the tragic hero and the grotesque actor will fail in order to overcome the conflict with the absolute. The defeat of the tragic hero is a sign of the admission of the absolute; whereas the defeat of the grotesque actor represents a derision of the absolute as well as its profanation. Kott explains that the derision of the absolute is not only addressed to the tormentor but also to the victim, whom accepted the tormentor's justice, while lifting him to the degree of the absolute. 'Lear as everyman in the modern world tends to be characterized as a victim of violent forces in an uncaring

[48] Cf. Normand Berlin. 'Beckett and Shakespeare'. *The French Review* 40. 5 (1967): p. 647.
[49] Kott, p. 104.

society rather than as an agent, an authoritarian monarch causing the violence that destroys him'.[50] The victim has therefore honoured his tormentor by identifying himself as a victim. Moreover, whereas tragedy is an evaluation of human fate and a meter for the absolute, the grotesque is a denunciation of the absolute for the sake of the frailty of human existence.

> The tragic situation becomes grotesque when both alternatives of the choice imposed are absurd, irrelevant or compromising. The hero has to play, even if there is no game. Every move is bad, but he cannot throw down his cards. To throw down the cards would also be a bad move.[51]

In *King Lear* – when Gloucester lands on a flat landscape, he transcends the limits of his own character to become Everyman – surrounded by the nothingness of a merciless Earth, where he is condemned to endure his sufferings until his time will come. Kott argues that the essence of *King Lear* is a query into the meaning of this journey, a quest into the existential possibility of Heaven and Hell. At the end of this tragedy, what survives – while the medieval and the renaissance orders of fixed values collapse – is the emptiness of the earth after this giant pantomime. Far from depending on the next world, the assumption is that this world – defective, decayed and indifferently cruel – is all there is, writes Susan Snyder.[52] Here, the Fool, the King, the Blind Man and the Mad Man perpetuate their abstracted dialogue.

The pantomime realised on stage by the grotesque actors possesses elements belonging to the circus; Gloucester, after tragically falling over an empty stage and being helped by his son Edgar, who pretends to be Poor Tom to rescue his father, is represented as a clown, while a philosophical buffoonery takes place in the act – of the type found in the modern theatre. Kott notes that in Shakespeare, clowns often mimic the gestures of kings and

[50] Reginald A. Foakes. Introduction to *King Lear*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. p. 26.
[51] Kott, p. 108.
[52] Cf. Susan Snyder. 'Between the Divine and the Absurd: "King Lear"'. *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's* Tragedies. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. p. 269.

heroes, although only in *King Lear* these tragic moments are performed *through* clowning. As Snyder remarks: 'Shakespeare placed Lear in an emphatically non-Christian milieu'.[53] Gloucester's suicide indeed has a meaning only if God exists – otherwise is just a 'somersault on an empty stage'.[54] Consequently, this main act and the entire situation is nothing but grotesque; suicide becomes a surrender to the cruellest end of all: death. In the play, everything that distinguishes men from one another – titles, social statuses, or even names – vanishes in an intransigent, remorselessness, and implacable world which has no pity for the human condition. Its inhabitants become merely shadows of themselves – everyone is just a man – nothing but man.[55] 'The blind man is a man, the madman is a man, the doting old man is a man. A nobody, who suffers, tries to give his suffering a meaning or nobility, who revolts or accepts his suffering, and who must die'.[56]

One might argue: Shakespeare did not consider man an honourable being? A man who, in all his humility, is nevertheless proud of being a man? D. J. Palmer provides a valuable answer to these quests. He claims that Kott is not concerned on the signification of Shakespeare *tout court*; but on his signification in our time – which will of course differ from yesterday's and tomorrow's. Therefore, according to Palmer, not only the scholar offers a fractional and diminished Shakespeare, he does it intentionally and voluntarily. Notwithstanding – if the absurdity, cruelty, and decay of the world were the most important truth, or even the whole truth – tragedy could not exist; there could be no catharsis of feeling. Kott did not consider the Shakespearean affirmation that man is a moral being, whose actions give meaning to his life and death. Kott's heroes are there only to record passively the

[53] Snyder, p. 263.
[54] Kott, p. 120.
[55] Cf. Ibid., pp. 104-126.
[56] Ibid., p. 126.

condition of the universe, while exposing the insignificance or triviality of human values. However, in *King Lear*, Cordelia's death confirms the vile injustice of the world – but it also declares the eternal value of love as a natural bond.

The concept of the grotesque and the absurd have certainly had a remarkable impact on Shakespeare's composition of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. Nonetheless, Shakespeare's universe is essentially more meaningful and prudent than the one depicted by the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty – without necessarily being more cheerful.[57] Shakespeare's quest for purpose in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* clashes with the cruelly absurd nature of human suffering. Although the dramatist, instead of depriving this search of meaning, embraces and delves into the absurd in a never-ending effort to overcome it.

> Does any here know me? Why, this is not Lear.
> Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?
> Either his notion weakens, his discernings
> Are lethargied – Ha! Walking? 'Tis not so.
>
> Who is it that can tell me who I am?
> (*King Lear* 1.4.217-21)[58]

As Normand Berlin states while comparing Shakespeare and Beckett: 'Shakespeare trusts language, allowing it to communicate meaning. Beckett uses language, but to show that there is no meaning to be communicated'.[59] Compassionately, Shakespeare reminds us that our attempt to find purpose in this life is not insignificant – it is the only thing we have.

[57] Cf. D. J. Palmer. 'The Shakespeare of Jan Kott'. *Critical Survey* 3.4 (1968): pp. 198-202.
[58] William Shakespeare. *King Lear*. Ed. Reginald K. Foakes. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. p. 204.
[59] Berlin, p. 651.

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