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Absurd in French theatre of Dada and Pre-Surrealism : summary

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6 SUMMARY

Absurd in French theatre of Dada and Pre-Surrealism

Objectives and structure of the publication

This book deals with the absurd as an aesthetic category in the theatre of French avant-gardes between 1916 and 1923. The reason for this time frame is the exceptional richness and variety of theatrical during the eight years mentioned, springing either from different aesthetic premises or from specific individual contributions to these aesthetics. In this epoch we find the most successful theatrical synthesis of the currents created before World War I, such as Futurism (G. Apollinaire: *The Breasts of Tiresias*), as well as independent creations foreshadowing Dada (G. Ribemont-Dessaignes: *Emperor of China*), Dada itself (T. Tzara: *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine*, Ribemont-Dessaignes: *The Mute Canary*, etc.), experiences on the frontier between Dada and Surrealism (A. Breton – P. Soupault: *If You Please*, etc.) and finally Surrealism, introducing itself with a text considered as the best of surrealist drama (R. Vitrac: *The Mysteries of Love*).¹

Such varied creative output, invites research into following in the footsteps of works which have been dedicated to the topic: *Le théâtre Dada et surréaliste* by Henri Béhar (Paris, Gallimard, 1979), presenting the basic panorama of the history of theatre in Dada and Surrealism, and *L'Acteur en effigie* by Didier Plassard, focusing on the figure of the “artificial man” in theatre of historical avant-gardes (Lausanne, L'âge d'homme, 1992). The justification for a study dedicated to dramatic creativity of the chosen epoch seems the more appropriate inasmuch that in relation to this theatre, in spite of the high reputation of the monographs mentioned, quite prejudiced judgements can be found. Thus, a publication considered as the

1 All of the plays of which English titles are mentioned in this summary exist in English translation.

essential opus of history of French theatre and drama² assesses without any explanation the work of G. Apollinaire and P. Albert-Birot as “jokes unworthy of study”³ (p. 825), considers G. Ribemont-Dessaignes as in no way innovative (pp. 837-838), which is debatable in spite of the author’s inspiration in Shakespeare, and judges the sketches by the duo A. Breton- P. Soupault to contain “the most literary language” (p. 840). These formulations lead to a more essential question: does the given period represent for theatre history only a negligible parenthesis? Moreover, various terms currently used in studies dedicated to this theatre do not seem convincing, for example, the often-mentioned “dream-like” character or “onirism” in Vitrac’s work. It is in fact the case that the first of these terms was used by Vitrac himself to comment his play *The Mysteries of Love*. However, the question remains whether “dream” or “onirism” are terms relevant for theatre analysis.

The choice of the aesthetic category studied by this book – the absurd – was motivated by the intense crisis of sense, caused within the chosen period by World War I. With this aesthetic focus, the author could formulate the objective of the book as an examination of anti-illusive dramatic proceedings on the levels of composition, character, plot and language, of which historical avant-gardes make a strong use. And especially, as a study of the scenical potential of such proceedings.

As to the choice of the method, an important circumstance has been the polemic concerning the pertinence of the concept of the “Theatre of the Absurd”, coined in an eponymous book, in 1961, by the British theatre critic Martin Esslin.⁴ The concept has both created very positive echoes and received condemnation, as it has been considered imprecise if not vague, and led a considerable number of theatre critics to a lack of confidence as to the validity of the category of the absurd in theatre in general. Hence, the author of this book, in order to define the absurd, decided to proceed independently, maintaining however a dialogue with M. Esslin and the *Dictionnaire de théâtre* by Patrice Pavis.⁵

The book contains three main chapters. The first one, “*La délicieuse logique*”: *vers l’absurde en tant que catégorie de théâtre* (“The delicious logic”⁶: towards the absurd as a theatre category) first examines the lexicographical, logical and philo-

2 Jomaron, J. de (ed.), *Le Théâtre en France*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

3 My translation. If not explicitly noted, all of the following citations and titles (with the exception of the plays’ titles) will be translated into English by the author of this book.

4 Esslin, M., *Theatre of the Absurd*, New York, Penguin Books, 1991.

5 Pavis, P., *Dictionnaire du théâtre*, Paris, Dunod, 2006.

6 The citation is from Jarry, and comes from a review, published in 1902, of an opera buffa with lyrics by his contemporary Franc-Nohain. This publication wishes to pay a tribute to the personalities who, although unstudied in the book, represent milestones of any research dedicated to the avant-gardes. On one hand, the writers and dramatists concerned are A. Jarry, A. Artaud and the Grand Jeu ; on the other, the aesthetician B. Fondane, whose writings seem to this author as having in particular revealed the dreams, choices and rejections as well as the weak points of the avant-gardes. Thus, the book cites these personalities in the titles of the three main chapters.

sophical definitions of the term, and uses the results of this analysis as tools with which the author approaches the domain of theatre in order to suggest a definition of the absurd in this field. This chapter is not synchronic but diachronic, for it departs from the opposition of the conceptions of European theatre based on one hand on “logic” and “clarity” of surface, culminating with the aesthetics of French Classicism, and on the other hand the conceptions using principles alternative to the first ones. Thus, after a short outline of features interpretable as absurd in the preclassic period, the chapter questions the role of the absurd in innovating reflection and practice related to theatre existing in France since the „rupture“ practised by Romanticism: Victor Hugo’s conception of the “grotesque”, the “absolute comic” coined by Charles Baudelaire, the conceptions of Naturalism, and Symbolism, and finally the contributions of three authors, Maeterlinck, Jarry and Apollinaire.

The composition of main chapter, *La discussion devient un immense théâtre* (The discussion becomes an immense theatre⁷) was based on the following needs: first, texts and an approach taking into account already existing studies and the “white spaces” of research. Second, to avoid unnecessary extension which might impede in-depth examination, as well as a “microscopic” method unable to lead to veritable conclusions synthesis. Therefore, and as the first section contains already an important analytical part,⁸ the main chapter is not built on a huge number of short analyses, but on three longer studies. These studies examine the first Dada text, *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine* by T. Tzara, then one of the first surrealist texts, *If You Please*, by the duo A. Breton – P. Soupault, and finally *The Mysteries of Love*, by the author generally considered as the only genuine surrealist dramatist, R. Vitrac. In other words, this choice covers the very first steps, the most intuitive and the most free, of two aesthetics aesthetics compared by Breton to “two waves from the same sea”.⁹ Each of these texts has its specific characteristics, which in the case of the two first ones referred to, brought a doubt as to their scenical viability. By contrast, the play by Vitrac is generally judged as probably the most authentic masterpiece of surrealist theatre.¹⁰

The author considers these apparent differences of theatrical qualities as a challenge, for they put out the following questions: In the “problematic” texts, do not their “faults” enlarge the possibilities of theatre? What is the role of thea-

7 Sentence coming from *Paul the Birds or the Place of Love*, text written in 1923 (published in 1925) by Artaud – a “play in the mind” according to his own words, in the form of a brief scenario.

8 This analytical part concerns chiefly a pantomime which inspired in Baudelaire the concept of absolute comic, and then *The Breasts of Tiresias* by Apollinaire.

9 Breton, A., *Entretiens*, Paris, NRF, 1952.

10 In fact, the other well known play by Vitrac, *Victor or the Power to the Children*, is of a much more traditional character.

trality in the first periods of Dada and Surrealism? And finally, to what extent are the features of the three texts similar?

The author is convinced that to examine these questions in texts where the two aesthetics find themselves in an emerging state, texts which thus employ more freedom than those written in later periods, is preferable to trying to embrace, with the risk of repetivity, the whole corpus of avant-garde theatre texts from within the chosen period of “the crisis of sense” . This choice was also motivated by the fact that certain other texts have already been studied extensively (i. e. Tzara’s *The Gas Heart*) ; others which seem able to be part of the corpus belong less to the “crisis of the sense” than could be expected (Yvan Goll’s theatre¹¹). On the contrary, the three texts which the has author selected have hardly been studied : as such (*If You Please*), or from the point of view of theatricality (*The First Celestial Adventure*, *The Mysteries of Love*).

The accent on the research of the scenical potential of the three plays is reflected in the titles of the three studies: *De la bouche aux fondements d’une dramaturgie* (From the mouth towards the basements of playwrighting; Tzara), *D’un music hall Dada à l’élargissement des possibilités du dialogue* (From a Dada music hall to an enlargement of dialogue possibilities; Breton – Soupault), *Rêver : le stupéfiant image* (Dreaming: the stupefying image; Vitrac).

It is worth adding that the three studies do not contain an analysis of staging of the texts. This is due to the fact these stagings were very rare, which means that existing information on the stagings is sometimes (almost) completely missing (*S’il vous plaît*). However, the texts themselves carry scenical possibilities, which orientated the author’s analyses.

The final part of this book, *Du “lien causal” aux “vastes portiques”* (From the “causal connection” towards the “vast porticoes”¹²) has among others the purpose of confronting the means of the absurd revealed in the studies of the main section with those used by the avant-garde of the 1950’s. Moreover, it attempts to evaluate Esslin’s contribution to the research of the absurd in theatre.

One more remark should be added, related to the presence, in a book intending to study French theatre, of the Rumanian Tzara. The author does not consider this circumstance as conflictual at all. On the contrary, it confirms the international dimension of historical avant-gardes, reminding us of the decisive

11 Goll’s theatre, in spite of his adventurous manifestoes, is of much more traditional nature, and marked namely by Expressionism. By the way, his most innovating play, *Mathusalem ou l’éternel bourgeois*, was first written and played in German.

12 The first citation comes from *Petit théâtre*, a collection of the earliest texts by R. Daumal and R.G. Gilbert-Lecomte, written around 1924 (the book was first published in 1957). In one of the sketches from this book, a character states he is not ready to believe in the strength of the causal connection unless he can be strung up on it, which happens and the character dies. The second one is from Baudelaire’s sonnet *Past life*, used by B. Fondane in his *Faux traité d’esthétique* (False treatise of aesthetics, 1938).

role of Dada in France. As many have already stated (i.e. Michel Sanouillet : *Dada à Paris*,¹³ and Henri Béhar, *Le Théâtre dada et surréaliste*, op. cit.), without Dada, put in the world by Tzara and his texts written essentially in French, played and published since 1920 directly in Paris where he had moved, French art, with its “horror of chaos” (Apollinaire)¹⁴ would have never reached the dimension of destruction, which had a decisive impact also on Surrealism. To banish Tzara from a study on French avant-gardes would be as equally unjustified as to proceed so with Apollinaire, a stranger of uncertain origin, who obtained French nationality only after jointing up the French army during the War of 1914.

Definition of the absurd

The definition of the absurd in this book suggests is the following one: no matter what the precise context is, the absurd consists in a rupture of causality – that is, in a transgression of a norm, connoting an absence of convenience, often felt as violent, if not scandalous. Then, in dialogue with M. Esslin, the author distinguishes two main types of the absurd. The first one is named the *indirect absurd*¹⁵. It is a parallel of the absurd observed by the philosophy of values, and consists in a reflection on a situation, state or principle understood as containing a scandalous lack of convenience. By contrast, the second type, the *direct absurd*, uses means specific for theatre: it does not reflect, but directly expresses the absurd. Which brings as a consequence “the impression of the absence of the least logical connection with the rest of the text and of the scene.”¹⁶ Thus, it provokes an uncertainty of meaning, a feature which can make the absurd appear at any of the levels generating the meaning, such as: character, plot, space and time, language, composition. Many well known examples can be immediately suggested : in Beckett’s *Happy Days*, Winnie’s repliques compared to her physical situation, the character being half buried in the soil; in Ionesco’s *The Bald Prima Donna*, the profoundly alogical anecdotes the characters recount one to another ; or, towards the end of the same play, the question concerning an eponymous character (who, until then, has not appeared nor has been spoken of), producing the impression that a decisive situation will follow, which however does not happen at all.

13 Sanouillet, M., *Dada à Paris*, CNRS Éditions, 2005.

14 Expression from *The New Spirit and the Poets* (1918), quoted in Nicholls, P., *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, Second Edition, Palgrave Macmilan, 2008, p.265.

15 The author owes the distinction of the two types of absurd to M. Esslin, who states it in a more implicit way, without using names for these different types. Cf. “The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition, it merely presents it in its being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images.” Esslin, M., *op. cit.*, p. 25.

16 Pavis, P., *op. cit.*, p. 1. My translation.

The book is dedicated to the direct absurd. This form of absurd is first studied in the latest part of the theoretical chapter, focused on history of the absurd in theatre and drama, in France after the period of classicism. Further on, the direct absurd is the object of the three analyses contained in the main chapter.

The reflection on the absurd in the history of French theatre after Classicism makes possible, among other things, to suggest the concept of the *alternative mimesis*, which can manifest itself as *weakened mimesis*, consisting in the fact that the relationships of similarity between the representing and the represented are much less evident than in traditional mimesis. Example: in Apollinaire's *The Breasts of Tiresias*, the female defaults are depicted, among others, as: "Sneeze cackle, after which she imitates the sound of the train."¹⁷ The second type is *paradoxical mimesis*: what is represented seems on the surface alogical, absurd, but is absolutely explicable on the level of deep structure.¹⁸ For example: the "collective actor" Jarry wished to use in crowd scenes; for instance in the parade of the Polish army in the first part of *Ubu the King*, the army had to be represented by one soldier.

In the main chapter of this book, the conception of alternative mimesis was used in the analysis of the the corpus, among others in order to distinguish between *weakened* or *paradoxical motivation* of a replique, a *weakened* or *paradoxical* metaphor or to state *paradoxical* action.

Concrete manifestations of the absurd in the studied texts

The concrete form of the absurd in the analysed texts is greatly influenced by the characteristic features of the aesthetics they belong to – Dada and Presurrealism. The use of the absurd in these aesthetics is motivated by the aim to finish radically, on all levels, with the traditional patterns considered as not functioning, and, above all, as radically inauthentic. This influences the narrative and discursive structures considerably. Thus, the subversion of basic categories is used systematically and intensively; in language, the maxims of relation and manner are violated, if not the the very principle of cooperation (by the so-called "destruction of language"¹⁹ and automatic writing), and the themes able to bring interior freedom and authenticity are explored, such as an apocalyptic end of civilization, charac-

17 Apollinaire, G., *The Breasts of Tiresias*, translated by Louis Simpson, in *Modern French Theatre*, E.P. Dutton & CO. 1966, p. 69.

18 The concept of *deep structure*, derived from generative grammar, is often used in theatre analysis for example by Patrice Pavis, in the sense of a meaning beyond the immediate one. See Pavis, P., *Le Théâtre contemporain. Analyse de textes de Sarraute à Vinaver*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2004.

19 This phenomenon, stated by H. Béhar, concerns Dada, known for its goal of "abolition of logic", and consists in structures not respecting the speech acts to the point they seem to destroy the very possibility of presence of acceptable significations. The author of this book suggests labelling these rebel structures *motivation attacks*.

ters disregarding common morality, “mad love”²⁰ and so on. Such characteristics provoke two main questions:

1. Do the above exposed features – namely the subversion and the indifference, if not disregard, of the practical use of language – make possible the existence of theatrical dialogue? That is, a dialogue which is sufficiently decodable, of dramatic interest and creates the plot (or contributes to it)?
2. Do these features make possible an efficient scenicity ?

Although a surface reading of the corpus produces the impression that positive answers to these questions are hardly possible, if not excluded, the analyses brought opposite results. Thus, *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine* destroys the traditional conception of theatrical language, dialogue, plot and character, and globally, the surface characteristics making possible direct staging. The result is a strong “deception of expectations”, but also, often, connotations of an aggressive joy of destruction, or “ebriation” with sound and rhythm in which all preoccupation with a possible meaning goes off. This is due to prosodic originality using a plurality of forms, mixing and ingeniously distributing expressions which seem to come from indigenous languages, with an effect of enigma and sensuality, chains of surprising interjections, both existing and invented, and “ordinary” French lexical material. The dramatic categories, although chased from the surface, are maintained at the level of deep structure²¹, with semantic as well as perlocutory strength.

Semantic and perlocutory efficiency concern as well, on the one hand, the plot. The text can actually be read as a story of the wish for purity or innocence, which is realized as a grotesque and apocalyptic fall. On the other hand, the same characteristics are present in the dialogue. In spite of the current comments that have been made, pointing out, in *The First Celestial Adventure*, the lack of dialogue, the text in the exposition contains a chain of repliques interconnected with relationships of motivation. The perlocutory power of these repliques is due in the first part of the text (in verses) to their dynamicity, to the alternance of easily docadable significations and those of enigmatic character, and to the fact that the first replique draws into an exchange all possible receptors, including the reader/the public. The interest of the central part of the text (Dada manifesto, prose and verses) lies in an ingenious implicit communication with the receptor, and in the final part (verses), in a suggestive address to an absent character, holding the power of rescue from the apocalyptic fall which seems imminent, and characterized at the same time as pure and marked by an agonizing rigidity.

20 *Mad love* is the title of a collection of poems by A. Breton, first published in 1937.

21 See note no. 18.

The characters as such are also powerful on the level of deep structure – although no scenic indication accompanies their presence and, with two exceptions, they do not make an explicit reference one to each other, being reduced to the state of simple voices participating in the dialogue. However, their names suggest roles and qualities entirely functional dramatically, individualizing the different characters, and transposable to the stage. Moreover, the distribution of the text of the “play” among the characters makes more palpable the possibility of interpreting it as a story of the aspiration to purity ending with a grotesque fall: the most important voices are those of two clowns.

Thus, the text of *The First Celestial Adventure* is an operational base for stage representation or a performance, both being able to combine the operational significations of deep structures with the prosodic effects of the surface.

In *If You Please* and *The Mysteries of Love*, the surrealist destruction interconnected with the effort to find a way of liberation of man brings as result an intensive revitalization of narrative and discursive patterns. The plays use means creating the impression of rude incompatibility with their context, which however on the level of deep structures show themselves as entirely justifiable, and are functional in dramatic situations

Hence, the automatic text contained in the two plays does not produce the sensation of an intellectual or emotional game for itself. In the parts where its use is intermittent (in *If You Please*, several parts of the dialogue in II; in *The Mysteries of Love*, the paradoxical metaphors), it results in effects strong from the pragmatic point of view: enigma and uncertainty, authentic as well as pretended emotions, attack and eschew. These effects combine themselves and are efficiently used in situations characterized by an irony wishing to be as surprising as possible. They concern before all the topic of relationship problems, which is precisely the theme of Act I in *If You Please* (each of the acts equals an independent short play) as well as the one of *The Mysteries of Love*.

When the automatic text is longer (in *If You Please*, most of the dialogue in III; in *The Mysteries of Love*, two shorter dialogues), it produces the impression of a different world, unlimited in its alterity and freedom, and at which the rules and laws of “our world” do not have any impact. This special language making arise a different world is characterized by important visuality and theatricality. Thus, the dialogue holds the dimension of an *inner theatricality*, of which it seems that it does not need to be completed by theatrical action. This inner theatricality seems completely acceptable and efficient also as to stage transposition. Moreover, this transposition can stress, as a contrapunct, several of the repliques which concern the referential situation and the other character participating in the dialogue. This possibility seems theatrically efficient the more that the “automatic dialogue” concerned is not considerably long (33 repliques), and it is framed by contrastive situations which use scenical materiality and psychologically interesting narrative

moments: surprise, gag, deception of expectations. Thus, in the beginning of the act, one of the two main characters, Maxime, arrives in a café and pays more and more attention to Gilda, who seems indifferent to his behaviour. Suddenly, Gilda unexpectedly engages herself in the dialogue, and the situation turns into a two-voice “automatic” confession. At the end, the café is entered by an Arab merchant, whose behaviour produces the impression that an imminent conflict threatens, which however leads to another deception of expectations: the waiter asks the merchant to leave, and he obeys. In the last scene, Maxime wants to accompany Gilda to her place, but she refuses, confessing she is syphilitic. Maxime reacts saying that it doesn’t matter and both leave together.

Let us add that the deception of expectations, in *If You Please*, serves above all to create “surprise for surprise”. At the same time however, it reveals the philosophy going beyond the common morality (cf. the characters of the “immoralists” Paul – Act I and Létoile – Act II). In *The Mysteries of Love*, the deception is above all a tool with dramatic power which richly uses the uncertainty of interpretation, composes the action, or makes it move forward. In this sense, *The Mysteries* work for example with macrocomposition: in the different tableaux, the same characters appear. However, they take part in actions which are at the frontier of logical compatibility or behind it. Another strong tool is a narrative use of a character with fluctuating identity at the end of the play. That is, the main characters, the lovers Patrice and Léa, meet a curious young boy, who behaves alternatively as Léa’s child, protector and lover. It is precisely this encounter, more than the very final sequence of the play (theatre within theatre) which brings the denouement of the play. That is to say, the protagonists, instead of receiving an answer at the question as to whether their absolute yet destructive passion has sense, they are thrown back all of their doubts by the child-protector-lover.

It should be added that the uniqueness of *The Mysteries of Love* lies in a complex deepening of presurrealist features that have already been observed in *If You Please* – namely of visuality, paradoxical metaphor and deception of suppositions. To such an extent that this deepening makes arise a different world, in which it seems that absolutely anything can happen. The levels of the language and the action are parallel and interchangeable, and the surrealist image, characterized by L. Aragon as “the stupefying image”, becomes flesh: it has the form either of a specific character, or of an interaction character / space.

Absurd in the conception of M. Esslin and the conception of this book

It should be stated at the outset that it was not the aim of the book by M. Esslin, published in 1961, to deal with the absurd in theatre as such, nor to publish a book about theatre history. As he himself argued in 1980, his wish was to con-

tribute efficiently, “in the give and take of argument” (p. 9), to the debate about avant-garde theatre of the 1950’s, judged at the moments of its apparition as “incomprehensible”.

Thus, M. Esslin’s definition takes into account strictly the theatre production of the 1950’s and the cultural context of the period, marked by existentialism. It consists of two parts. The first one describes a radical transformation of narrative and discursive structures- this is to say, the features of the *direct absurd* characteristic of the given plays: absence of plot; of “subtlety of characterization and motivation” in the characters; absence of a composition consisting of a neatly exposed conflict, its development and solution; absence of dialogue in traditional sense; substituted by “incoherent babblings”. To these characteristics belongs according to M. Esslin also the absence of realism, which would with traditional means depict the features typical of the given epoch (pp. 21-22).

The second characteristics of the avant-gardes of the 1950’s has, according to Esslin, an ideological nature – it is the type of absurd that this book has labelled *indirect* absurd. Esslin argues that avant-gardes of the 1950’s express as a block the feeling that he considers as essential of their time: “metaphysical anguish of man facing the absurdity of his condition” (pp. 23-24).

Finally, Esslin interconnects both types of the absurd: the avant-gardes of the 1950’s express the indirect absurd in a specific way which can be qualified as “open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” (p. 24).

If we leave away Esslin’s stressing of the indirect absurd, which this author’s concept does not consider as indispensable for the existence of absurd in theatre, another difference between his concept of the absurd and the one of this book lies in the principle making spring the direct absurd. For Esslin, this principle is the “open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought”; this book, however, defines the direct absurd as the absence of causality, as isotopic rupture.

Esslin’s principle seems to this author debatable, for it brings up the following question: if the throwing away of the rational tools implicates the absence of discursive thought, how can it be possible to integrate to such a pattern, for example, the language of the teacher from Ionesco’s *The Lesson*, which the character considers as faultless and perfect? How to integrate there the plots based on the deception of expectations, so frequent in the corpus of this book? Would not the principle of the direct absurd rather be the negation of traditional causality? Which can have narrative consequences, such as leading to deception of expectations as well as to a plot consisting of sequences without a clear connecting point (like in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*), as well as discursive consequence, like the violation of basic logical principles and presuppositions in the language of certain characters (whether these consider themselves as logical or not), decomposition of dialogue and so on?

The reservations expressed as to Esslin’s conception of the absurd do not inform at all its inspiring character, proving an important sensibility for the ques-

tion. It is to the author of *Theatre of the Absurd* that this book owes the distinction of two plans of the absurd, ideological and exclusively theatrical, as well as the definition of a fool or a clown as a character unable to understand the most elementary logical relationships. In other words, even if this work had decided, in order to define the absurd, to proceed independently, it would have been impossible to avoid Esslin, who revealed himself as an interlocutor of quality.

It should be also stressed that Esslin shows with precision many of the substantial means of the direct absurd, in the avant-gardes of the 1950's as well as in history of occidental drama. It is of course possible, when studying his book into detail, to observe a debatable method, several distortions as well as a few errors. However, the temporal distance of more than fifty years dividing the birth of his, as he termed it, "working hypothesis" from the contemporary epoch should be taken into account. Let us add his book was the first to draw attention to certain facts or to suggest them more to the general public (like the profound inner connection among part of comic theatre of Antiquity, medieval carnival theatre and the Commedia dell'Arte). And finally, the fact he suggested that one should place the category of the absurd in the centre of the debate about the avant-gardes of the 1950's (and about a certain theatrical tradition) is a novelty proving the acuity of his point of view. With this suggestion, Esslin follows up with the sensibility of the aesthetic absurd characteristic of the first decades of the 20th century, and with the authors studied in this book.

A meaning of the absurd? Towards the "vast porticoes"

After examining Esslin's concept, insisting on the meaning of the absurd beyond its specifically theatrical role – this is to say, on a *value* of the absurd – this book puts out the same question regarding the texts it analyses. In these texts, what does the absurd say about man, the world and the climate related to "being-in-the-world"?

The absurd of the avant-gardes of the 1950's expresses, as Esslin states, mostly metaphysical anguish, linked to the absurdity of human condition. On the contrary, the texts of this book's corpus, from 1916-1923, despite the trauma of the Great War and the will to "destroy everything", urgently seek values, and seem convinced of their existence. Thus, *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine* is an apocalypse, but contains an invitation to innocence, spontaneity, childlike joy and to play. In *If You Please*, one of the plots is a social and moral utopia (a young and rich man falls in love with a streetgirl who confesses to be aging; the text is an ode to liberation by the means of love, authentic and pure). Finally, *The Mysteries of Love* concerns situations which, although they bring suffering, are the only ones making it possible to reach a world worth living in, one that is more authentic than the common one. These thematic specificities are joined by verbal and theat-

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rical means. Thus, language does not at all express the impotence of communication, nor refuses to pronounce itself on the context of utterance. This language can be precise and efficient, and can make completely concrete situations develop.

The essential message of the texts examined in this book is according to the author the will (and the practice) of an unlimited freedom, with the goal of an integral way of life on which the common customs have no impact. The will to be, simply, in an authentic way. A will which Benjamin Fondane, contemporary of French historical avant-gardes and their fine observer, symbolized with the image from a verse by Baudelaire, of the “vast porticoes”.²²

²² Fondane, B., *Faux traité d'esthétique*, Paris, Méditerranée, 1998, p. 130. For information on the poem used and its translation in English, see note 12.