THE ABSURD

Arnold P. Hinchliffe

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Volume 4

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General Editor's Preface

This volume is one of a series of short studies, each dealing with a single key item, or a group of two or three key items, in our critical vocabulary. The purpose of the series differs from that served by the standard glossaries of literary terms. Many terms are adequately defined for the needs of students by the brief entries in these glossaries, and such terms will not be the subjects of studies in the present series. But there are other terms which cannot be made familiar by means of compact definitions. Students need to grow accustomed to them through simple and straightforward but reasonably full discussions of them. The purpose of this series is to provide such discussions.

Some of the terms in question refer to literary movements (e.g. 'Romanticism', 'Aestheticism', etc.), others to literary kinds (e.g. 'Comedy', 'Epic', etc.), and still others to stylistic features (e.g. 'Irony', 'The Conceit', etc.). Because of this diversity of subject-matter, no attempt has been made to impose a uniform pattern upon the studies. But all authors have tried to provide as full illustrative quotation as possible, to make reference whenever appropriate to more than one literature, and to compose their studies in such a way as to guide readers towards the short bibliographies in which they have made suggestions for further reading.

John D. Jump

University of Manchester

Preface

When it was first suggested to me that I should write a short account of *The Absurd*, my reaction was that Martin Esslin had already done it. It is his book which, more than anything else, has made the term and the philosophy widely available although restricted, unintentionally, to a small body of plays. These plays still strike me as the *most significant* literature of Absurdity but they have precedents and parallels elsewhere. Indeed, when the subject began to emerge as a document and not a slogan, the difficulty was to know where to begin and where to end.

I have taken it as axiomatic that for Absurdity to exist, God must be dead and that following this awareness there must be no attempt to substitute a transcendent *Alter Ego*. If, in the last analysis, writers produce as the great truth something which strikes us as very familiar – such as love or manly fellowship – those virtues now exist in a God-less context, and their achievement is the more difficult. The death of God and Transcendence safely eliminates most of the distinguished predecessors – such as Kafka or Dostoevsky – and limits the area of historical description to the last forty years. Even so, it proved impossible to cover, in the space available, either the novel or, more importantly, the philosophical background to the literature. But, as I have said, the play is *by its form* the best approach to *Absurdity* absurdly expressed – with one or two exceptions – and, therefore, no apology is needed for following in Martin Esslin's footsteps.

In *The Playwright as Thinker* (p. 127), Eric Bentley reminds us that critical terms can never be more than 'approximations and conveniences' and that when they become battlegrounds, 'when

someone wants to know which of the varieties is the *real* thing, we have tumbled from rational discourse into superstition.' I have tried to avoid this error.

Arnold P. Hinchliffe

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