THE ABSURD IN C. D. GRABBE'S JEST, SATIRE, IRONY, AND DEEPER SIGNIFICANCE

Alfred L. Castle

A well recognized irony in the history of dramaturgy is that a playwright's unique weltanschauung may be incongruous with the larger societal weltgeist. Such an artist may consequently be largely ignored until the proper historical transfigurations have been worked and audiences are more receptive to his creations. Born in the midst of the Romantic appreciation of life, Christian Dietrich Grabbe (1801 - 1836) was constitutionally unable to share it. Many of his intellectual peers held to the happy hypothesis that individualism was a mystic manisfestation of the Divine Principle. Grabbe, on the other hand, denied the claim that history or its participants benefited from divine immanence. Holding to the atelic, radical contingency of the universe, he additionally was forced to impugn the Romantic notion that there existed a transtemporal meaning which could redeem the phenomenal world from meaninglessness. For Grabbe, historical protagonists were ridiculous, senseless persons held pawn to an antifinalistic universe.

Although ignored by a majority of Europeans, for over a century, Grabbe can now be appreciated for his anticipation of the Theater of the Absurd and its philosophic assumptions. Indeed, Martin Esslin has correctly alluded to the affinity between contemporary Absurdists and the author of Jest, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Significance.[1] A more exact analysis of this latter masterpiece of humor noire will illuminate Grabbe's early use and understanding of absurdity as a word-interpreting metaphor.

In the Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus summarizes the five major sources for Absurdist thought. First, a sense of the universe's "hostile" unmeaning can emerge from a sudden appreciation (Joyce would say "epiphany") of the pointlessness and futility of daily activities. Although masked by artificial rationalization and Schopenhauerian "politeness", our culturally mandated routines possess a circuitous denial of any real improvement toward higher ends. Secondly, the sense of the Absurd arises when we cease to live in the future and face the "now of our existence". Like Eduard Von Hartman, Camus and Grabbe would force us to recognize our irrevocable temporal nature and the impossibility of future rational perfection or acceptable improvement. Our values change before we can understand them and human relations erode before fully realized. The radical historical nature of humans prevents us from achieving a stable, logical self-identity, much less recognizing one in others. Most pertinent of all, the stable categories of traditional logic are rendered impotent while the cosmos remains a mystery. Thirdly, a source of the absurd lies in man's alienation from nature. As Camus points out,

> At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this minute lose the illusory meaning

> with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise . . . that denseness and that strangeness of the world is absurd.

Additionally, the complete annihilation of life itself guarantees that our actions in life have no metaphysical significance and that the universe is what Voltaire recognized as a "wretched jest". Finally, man's reliance on reason and words to penetrate nature's opacity is wholly inadequate. "Reason" as expressed in "words" are for all of Grabbe's characters only part of a "mediocre comedy".[2] With the inability of man to transcend "words" he is reduced to empty gestures and meaningless patterns. To compound our uncertain condition, the universe itself manifests only contingency; its very existence is irrational and meaningless. The irrational character of both epistemological subject and object combine to provide the foundations for the absurd position in which we find ourselves. As Camus concludes, "The Absurd is not in man, nor in the world, but in their presence together."

Grabbe anticipated the first source for the sense of the Absurd and demonstrated an awareness of ontic absurdity on several occasions in Jest, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Significance. Indeed, a common thread throughout the play is the fatuousness of routine action and dialogue. In Act II, Scene Two, the uninspired poet Ratpoison is unable to create an original poem. In a parody of the usual Romantic belief that the inspired poet speaks for the transcendental Spirit, Ratpoison has "Plenty of rhymes (but) . . . not a single idea!" Grabbe further debunks the creative process of the poet by rendering ridiculous, yet realistic, a specific instance of that process. Ratpoison, with full seriousness, believes that he can poeticize the idea that he has no ideas while chewing his pen.

> No inspiration? Than I shall have to enumerate everything which chews. A cat chews, a polecat chews, a lion--stop! A lion! What does a lion chew? He chews either a sheep, or an ox, or a goat, or a horse--Stop! A horse! --Now what the mane is to a horse, the quill is to a pen; thus both look rather alike--Shouting. Eureka, there's the image! Bold, daring, new, Calderonian!
>
> 'I sat down at my table chewing pens, Just like the lion, 'ere the grey of dawn. His rapid-running pen, a horse, does chew on--[3]

Never, our "desacrilized" poet concludes "has there been such a metaphor!"[4]

The ease with which society is fooled by Chattertonian youthful genius is also exposed in the play. Little Gottlieb has the worms and, because his peasant family believes him possessed of genius, he is sent to the Schoolmaster for training. The Schoolmaster, paid for his services in Schnapps, promises to instruct the boy in all the vital intellectual considerations of the day.

> I shall not only initiate him into the deepest mysteries of dogmatics, of homiletics, and the other related science of theology, but shall also see to it that he is instructed in the plastic, idyllic and mephytic major science of our country preachers,

> as well as in porkchopping, cattleslaughtering, and dungloading.[5]

In order to convince the boy's potential sponsor of his "phenomenal intellect", the Schoolmaster in good Sophist style recommends that

> either you (Little Gottlieb) must never open your mouth--then they'll think confound it, he must have a lot to keep quiet about . . .; --or you must say something absolutely nonsensical--then they'll think . . . he must have said something very profound, for we, who otherwise, understand everything, don't understand this; --or you must eat spiders and swallow flies. --then they'll think, confound it all, there's a big man for you for he abhors neither flies nor cobwebs.[6]

The Schoolmaster, a cynical man who realizes the ease with which society bestows meaning and importance upon the truly trivial, does more than provide recognizable social criticism. Although the Schoolmaster is the most fully aware of society's collective insapiency, he never makes a proposal for social reform. Indeed, he displays no odium for social abuse; he does, however, casually accept the order as absurd. Grabbe himself varied from the Romantic norm of positive criticism of rationa-lism and bourgeois complacency by refusing to accept the premise that there were transcendent verities which could judge our earthly actions. As Roger Nicholls correctly points out, ". . . there is no standard by which judgment is made other than his (Grabbe's) own youthful intolerance of compromise or vulgarity. He attacks because he sees only weakness and delusion".[7] If the world cannot support an objective moral order, Grabbe's feeling that things are pointless and futile may be justified.

The most complete account of the world's distressing dysteleology is made in the Devil's description of it in Act II, Scene II. The poet Ratpoison is astonished at the Devil's suggestion that he does not know the real nature of the world. For the confident poet, the world is the "essence of all existence" and is fully knowable through normal perception and scientific theory. For him, as for most humans, the world is orderly and meaningful; the actions of individuals are purposeful and conducive to personal or societal progress. However, the Devil has had many millenia to witness the true cosmic process. For him, the

> 'world' is nothing more than a mediocre, indifferent comedy. It has been smeared together during vacations by a beardless loud-mouthed angel who, if I am not mistaken, is still in the twelfth grade, and lives in the ordinary world which man finds incomprehensible. The copy in which we are found is one the shelves of the Lending Library at X, I believe. It is being read at this very moment by a beautiful lady known to the author who will hand him her opinion at teatime this evening, that is, over six trillion years from now.[8]

Because of the contingency of life's "non-planning", everything is subject to ridicule. Political movements are inherently repetitious and absurd because they are the trial literary works of the Devil. His magnum opus is "The French Revolution, A Fourteen Year Tragedy, with a Prologue by Louis XV, Chorus by Emigrants". Out of ennui, the Devil is busy now with a farce comedy currently running under the title: "The Greek War for Freedom".[9]

Grabbe has presented us with aclear exposition of a major element in Absurdist thought. With disquieting casualness, he has revealed a disjunctive world where nothing ultimately can be taken seriously. Such a realization may inspire laughter, but it is likely to be a "laughter of despair".[10] No longer supported bysupramundane axiology or aletiology we are fully exposed to the contrast between our ideal aspirations and the sad atelic routine of our daily rounds.[11]

Another major category of Absurdist thought is the recognition of our radical temporal nature. Because time changes us and our world so completely and with such rapidity, no static conceptualizations will be adequate to explain the world. Like Cratylus, the Absurd thinker believes that it is an ontological impossibility for us to step in the same river once. Yet paradoxically, as Dostoevski and Tolstoy pointed out, it is on such inappropriate categorical, rational systems that we place our hope for knowing. Attempts to appropriate process into our formal cognition have ended in the kind of problems discovered by Alfred North Whitehead in Process and Reality. Hence, man's inability to conceptualize his existence in static categories renders him ignorant, and in his disinclination to realize or accept that fact, absurd.

In Jest, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Significance, Grabbe questions our ability to successfully categorize a world characterized by spontaneity and process. In Act I, Scene Three, for example, the Devil is found in a room in the castle undergoing examination by four natural scientists. One of the scientists avers that the specimen looks like the Devil. His conjecture is rejected by the others as being "ab initio impossible, for the Devil does not fit into our system".[12] The second scientist's analysis of the specimen is most revealing of our vaunted rationality. He claims that he sees

> something positively maidenlike there; the bushy, overhanging eyebrows indicate that delicate, female timidity which tries to conceal even its own glances; and the nose which you call turned-up,seems rather out of politeness to have been tilted back in order to leave an extra-large open expanse upon which the languishing lover may lavish his kisses; --enough, if all does not deceive me, then this frozen person is, indeed, a parson's daughter.

With less scientific rigor but no less certainty, the fourth scientist gets the others to agree that the specimen is a female German writer.[13] Thus in some manner the extreme practitioners of logic are less able to recognize reality than the simple blacksmith who recognizes the Devil at once in Act I, Scene Four.

Yet another example of Grabbe's distrust of static and rigid conceptual categories is the escape of the mercenary duo of Wernthal and Count Murdax who have conspired to kidnap the female heroine, Liddy. Rescued at the last minute by the hideous but kind Mollfels, Liddy's father (the Baron) demands that the two conspiratorsbe severely punished. At this point, Grabbe destroys the theatrical illusion by reuniting the reality of the play with that of the audience. The Count, feeling that the Baron's plan for revenge may be all too real, screams

> You want me bound and dragged through the streets! Ho, is that the reward I get for so divinely playing my role? Do you think, Mr. Theatrebaron, that I didn't know you were the Actor W _ _ _ y, and that you dare do nothing against me? --Quick, Wernthal, let's climb down into the orchestra and get to the musicians; they are my most intimate friends and wouldn't touch a hair on our heads.[14]

With that exclamation the two villains escape into the "reality" of the audience.

At the end of the play, Grabbe further confuses the audience by appearing in the play himself. After Liddy has been rescued by the uncomely Mollfels and the Devil returned to Hell, Grabbe appears to help the poet Ratpoison drink the celebratory wine. The Schoolmaster protests that Grabbe insults other writers and has the "insipid face of a monkey". When the Schoolmaster tries to shut the door in the playwright's face, the kindly Liddy advises the Schoolmaster not to be "embittered against the man who created you".[15] She invites Grabbe in and the play concludes. The schism between reality and fiction and between comedy and tragedy have both been blurred.

It is significant that Grabbe was not merely playing in Romantic fashion with the forms and materials of a play for the purpose of demonstrating the superiority of Spirit over Nature. Anticipating the Theater of the Absurd, his characters and their environment do have their own reality. The traditive distinction between fiction and non-fiction cannot be supported because there is no transcendently objective "Reality" that can sit in judgment of our world. For Grabbe, as for Alfred Jerry and Eugene Ionesco, the apparent essence of the universe is disorder and the honest writer must reflect that disorder. Unlike the coeval Romantics, Grabbe cannot manipulate illusions as the very term presumes an objective order. The very categories on which our fragile minds have always depended are problematic.

A third aspect of Absurdist thought, man's alientation from nature and himself, is not as fully developed in Jest, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Significance. Grabbe does, however, make it clear that one source of this alienation is our inability to relate to the world directly and without the artificial mediation of "words". When the Devil hints that he may be the prince of demons, all four scientists in Act I, Scene II prepare to flee. But the Devil calls after them

> Gentlemen! Where are you going? Be calm! Relax! Surely you're not running away from some mere play on my name, are you? They call me the Devil, but that's not who I really am.

When the four men ask for his identity, his "words" serve to create the reality of his being a laudable man. He is

> Theophilous Christian Devil, Vicar of the Duchy of _____'s Service, Honorary member of a society for the advancement of Christianity among the Jews, and Knight of the Papal Order for Civil Distinguished Service.[16]

Later, still questioning our reliance on words to mediate the world, the Devil tells the poet Ratpoison that the words "Heaven" and "Hell" exist but questions the "reality" of the referents. The irony of the Devil's directions for finding Hell imply the cleavage between the actual and our linguistic conventions which cannot reflect it adequately. The Devil says that Hell is "a little far" from the village but

> if you should wish to get there in a hurry, you must travel via Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, or Paris where you go to the King's Wall, Fish Alley, Slipshod Row, or the Palais Royal, respectively; from these Tartarus is but five minutes away, and you will find only the best roads from there on.[17]

This kind of alienation was later to serve as a major reason for the efforts of the phenomenologists to bypass "mere words".

Grabbe's conception of our alienation from nature takes a minor literature turn when we see him denying the Romantic faith in the countryside's restorative powers. The play clearly implies that Schelling and Wordsworth were wrong in finding a kindred Spirit revealed in nature during contemplative moments. In the play, the outdoors serves as a place of labor for the poor, a place of danger for Liddy, and a source of inspiration and knowledge for none. The rural farmer Tobias is particularly satirized for stupidity and greed in Act I, Scene One.

Alienation from one's self is also hinted at in the characters of the Schoolmaster and Mollfels. For whatever unknown reason, the most intelligent mortal in the play has become a cynical bibulous man. The Schoolmaster has come to accept his inferior social position but perhaps not his inability to realize his real (if limited) intellectual ability. The mock-hero Mollfels, suffering from unusual physical ugliness ("seven old women jumped terror-stricken into the water upon seeing his face"), is in fact an honorable person. This irony serves as a kind of "objective corollary" for the existentially experienced alienation Grabbe perceives all mankind as facing.

Another Absurdist concept, the ignobility and anserine occurrence of death, is touched on by Grabbe. Although not possessed of Heideggerian

angst to the extent that most contemporary Absurdists are, he does make death appear pointless. The Devil's demand that the Count murder thirteen innocent tailors, for example, is grotesque enough to challenge the very importance of life.[18] Furthermore, Grabbe implies that man has no rationale explanation for death and the pain it brings. Beyond the fact that death appears to be thoroughly gratuitous, we can know nothing of the reasons or significance it may have. Indeed, our most respected intellects have failed to sufficiently explain death. Even Kant and Aristotle fail in their efforts to categorize or conceptualize the mysterious. As the Devil tells it

> during off-hours (in Hell) we usually make window panes or eyeglass lenses out of ghosts because they are invisible and for that reason also transparent. Thus recently, when my grandmother had a strange whim to look into Virtue, she set the philosophers Kant and Aristotle both upon her nose; but as she looked through them it became steadily darker, and she made herself a lorgnette out of two Pomeranian farmers instead.[19]

Death becomes even more oppressive if denied transcendent significance or redemption. For Grabbe, there probably is no such significance and, if there were, we could not know it. Because of our thralldom to "words", we additionally could not express it.

Lastly, the Absurdists note the purposeless quality of man's mechanical gestures and meaningless patterns. This idea is, of course, a natural consequent of their doubt of life's overall meaning and reality. The pointless moral and physical chaos in which men find themselves is expressed in the Devil's successful persuasion of Count Murdax to murder thirteen apprentice tailors. The Count is at first reluctant to commit the murders not because it violates a transcendent axiological system, but because it would violate a "number pattern" that he arbitrarily accepts: "I'll do away with nine--eleven--yes, even twelve; only spare me the thirteenth; twelve's a nice round number!" When the Count further objects to the slaughter because "I'm wearing a new coat and a new white vest, and with this mass slaughter they'll be sure to get all messed up",[20] the Devil assuages his reservations by advising him to put on a napkin! Later, in Act III, Scene Two, the murders are committed in a grotesque pantomine with the Count so protected!

Furthermore, in a world in which values are unredeemed and gestures substitute for authentic feeling, there is no room for genuine anger or enthusiasm. With no higher, objective set of truths by which we can judge our actions, we are reduced to trivialized posturing. The Devil, a completely recognizable fellow, stands for relative chaos and disorder rather than "pure evil".[21] When the poet Ratpoison inquires as to the nature of punishment for the damned in Hell, he is told by the Devil that

> We keep on laughing at a murderer until he finally laughs at himself for having taken the trouble to kill someone. The severest punishment for one of

> the damned, however, is simply this: he must read the Evening News and the Freethinker but is not allowed to spit on them.

and furthermore,

> Not only the Bad comes to Hell, but also the Wretched, Deplorable, and Trivial; thus even the good Cicero sits there as well as the nasty Catiline.[22]

In a radically contingent universe which fails to underwrite objective values, our certainties even of the netherworld are ludicrous.

Jest, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Significance remains an entertaining aesthetic and comedic play. Perhaps due to the topical character of his literary criticism, it has rarely been performed on stage. Nonetheless, the recent events of history have exposed the Romantic and Enlightenment certitudes to painful questioning and we now have real cause to appreciate Grabbe's view of life. Doubtless he would have had a happier reception in the post-modern period we are wrestling with today. Grabbe's suspicion that the ultimate discovery of noumenal, certain, and absolute principles is impossible is now commonplace in scientific and philosophical circles. His role in formulating an early anticipation of Absurdist thought guarantees him an important place in the intellectual history of Europe.

FOOTNOTES

1. Martin Esslin, The Themes of the Absurd. Anchor Books, No. 279 (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

2. Roy Cowen, Christian Dietrich Grabbe, p. 164 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972).

3. Christian D. Grabbe, Jest, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Significance, translated by Maurice Edwards in From the Modern Repertoire, edited by Eric Bentley (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1952) II, p. 18.

4. Ibid., p. 19.

5. Ibid., p. 4.

6. Ibid.

7. Roger Nicholls, The Dramas of Christian Dietrich Grabbe (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1969), p. 81.

8. Jest, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Significance, op. cit., p. 20.

9. Ibid.

10. Spiridion Wukadinowic, ed. Grabbe's Werke. V. (Berlin: Deutsches Verlagshaus Bong and Co., 1912), p. 278.

11. Roger Nicholls, op. cit., p. 89.

12. Jest, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Significance, op. cit., p. 6.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., pp. 39-40.

15. Ibid., p. 42.

16. Ibid., p. 7.

17. Ibid., p. 23.

18. Ibid., pp. 16-17.

19. Ibid., p. 21.

20. Ibid., p. 16.

21. Roy C. Cowen, "Satan and the Satanic in Grabbe's Dramas", Germanic Review, 39 (1964), p. 135.

22. Ibid., p. 21.