The World of Prevert: Encounter With the Absurd.

William Frank Adams Jr
Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/1767

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetsd@lsu.edu.
ADAMS, Jr., William Frank, 1939-
THE WORLD OF PREVERT: ENCOUNTER WITH THE ABSURD. [Portions of Text in French].

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, Ph.D., 1970
Language and Literature, modern

University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan
THE WORLD OF PREVERT:
ENCOUNTER WITH THE ABSURD

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Foreign Languages

by
William Frank Adams, Jr.
B.A., University Southern Mississippi, 1965
May, 1970
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The writer acknowledges his great indebtedness to Dr. Mary S. Metz, Professor of French at Louisiana State University, whose intelligent guidance and perceptive insight into literary expression made possible the completion of this dissertation. The writer would also like to express his appreciation for the help and encouragement of his wife Donna, and that of Singe and Pyewacket.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I: ENCOUNTER WITH THE ABSURD</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II: JACQUES PREVERT'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE ABSURD</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III: SOLUTIONS TO THE ABSURD</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV: JACQUES PREVERT'S SOLUTION TO THE ABSURD</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

The acknowledgment of man's absurd condition is a major theme of twentieth century French literature, and the rendition of this observation is as various as the hero's reaction to their absurd condition. Certain heroes seen in the works of Giraudoux, Anouilh, Malraux, Sartre, Camus, Beckett, and Ionesco do not revolt against the absurd in the name of mankind. They are crushed by the weight of existence and accept the role of object. Others are cognizant of man's absurd condition, but refuse to go a step further by revolting against the absurd in the name of mankind. This encounter with the absurd does not necessarily end in a state of inertia in the works of such writers as Sartre, Camus and Ionesco. Some of their heroes make a positive affirmation of life and accept the finitude of man. They declare the value of the individual by revolting in the name of humanity. The dignity of man is thus proclaimed in spite of his finitude and lack of justification.

These same traits are exhibited in the poetry of Jacques Prévert. With him, the encounter with the absurd is not only on a metaphysical level, it also takes concrete form in oppressive religious, political and social institutions. He paints man as refusing to assert his individuality in face of the absurd. But, by presenting such individuals, Prévert rejects a negative attitude that results in submissive-
ness. For him, life is of the utmost importance and any system, whether social or philosophical that restricts man's freedom of expression is a negative value. The unique aspect of Prévert's solution to the absurd lies in his approach to reality. Emphasis is upon the intuitive nature of man through which he transcends his situation. Man feels that he is he and needs no rational explanation to reinforce this knowledge. He is only himself when he allows his sensual nature to dictate his behavior. Man does not have the right to reduce others to his will, but rather, through the acceptance and love of himself, he will recognize the uniqueness and importance of others and will be aware of the need for the love of mankind, even in the face of conflicts. All men are a part of nature, and the violation of nature is a violation of the essence of man. The appeal to the sensations of man is an appeal to man that he, along with all others, is a harmonious whole.

Prévert's approach to art is synonymous with his approach to life. He intuits reality and transforms it through his imagination into a greater reality which all men are capable of experiencing. He represents a revolt against traditional artistic forms in favor of man's ability to create his own expression. It is a philosophy of art that appeals to the senses rather than the intellect, and this is his proposal to man. He implores man to reject the rigid systems of behavior and experience reality as a
unique individual who continually, through his imagination, renews reality with each experience.
CHAPTER ONE

ENCOUNTER WITH THE ABSURD

Any attempt to arrive at a finite definition of the "absurde" lies outside of the intentions of this dissertation. The various definitions are probably as numerous as the exponents, but a general concensus would probably coincide with that of Henri Peyre who says that "the absurdity springs from the confrontation between the pathetic call of man and the unreasonable silence of the world."¹ The absurd is a feeling that permeates much of twentieth century French literature. As an approach to the human condition, it transcends philosophical systems that attempt a rational explanation of the universe. Man's aspirations are limited to this world because of his finite nature, and as Glicksberg says, "death presents the supreme challenge of the absurd."² In this chapter, several works of twentieth century literature will be examined in which different characters react in different ways when confronted with the absurd. Their reactions are variable, but they do not transcend the absurd by revolting against it. Those heroes who


do revolt against the absurd will be treated in a later chapter.

It would be impossible to treat all of twentieth century literature that may be related to the concept of the absurd, and it is therefore necessary that the writer of this dissertation arbitrarily select those works that he feels show a trend in the development of this particular attitude.

It is thus, perhaps, better to begin with a writer who does not explicitly represent the modern concept of the absurd, but does present the dilemma of modern man in face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The theater of Jean Giraudoux represents man faced with an impossible situation, and unable to act. As Guichamaud says, "In Giraudoux's theater the hero or protagonist straddles two essences and either believes he can participate in both at the same time or is forced or asked to participate in them." The hero is thus unable to choose. He wants to make the right choice, but he seemingly does not have the strength to fight against what he feels is inevitable.

In Giraudoux's play, La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu, man is seen as a mechanical being, unable to truly act. He adheres to this absurd condition, and easily succumbs to the values that lie outside of himself. As opposed to those

such as Hector and Andromaque who attempt to change the situation through positive action, Busiris expresses the importance of absolute values when he tells Hector that, "L'anéantissement d'une nation ne modifie en rien l'avantage de sa position morale internationale." Justification that is based on an abstraction replaces the possibility of relative values, and all men must submit to an absolute that they may find repugnant. Individual choice is subdued by a total concept that is meaningless. The people of Troy readily accept such absurd abstractions.

Robert Cohen explains this abstraction:

In the long run of time, war leaves memories of death and ruin; at the moment of its inception, it is a sublime vision of destiny. In the play, the dominant face of war is represented by the absolute and pure beauty of Helen.5

Hélène is an abstraction. She is unconsummated ideal love that lies outside of the realm of reality. She is not a real part of humanity, but rather a symbol to be followed to its logical conclusion: that of death and destruction. By contrast, reality is represented by Hector and Andromaque who are real lovers, lovers in flesh and blood.6 They represent man who is aware of the danger of absolutes and abstract symbols.

---


6Ibid., p. 99.
But, the mysterious forces that seem to govern the universe prove too powerful for Hector. He is aware that he cannot justify a war over Hélène, but he is faced with an insurmountable situation that he cannot control. Even though he still hopes, he accepts the fact that he is powerless to change the forces in motion. This attitude is expressed in his conversation with Ulysse.

ULYSSE: Mais l'univers le sait, nous allons nous battre.

HECTOR: L'univers peut se tromper. C'est à cela qu'on reconnait l'erreur, elle est universelle.

ULYSSE: Espérons-le. Mais quand le destin, depuis des années, a surélevé deux peuples, quand il leur a ouvert le même avenir d'invention et d'omnipotence, quand il a fait de chacun, comme nous l'étions tout à l'heure sur la bascule, un poids précieux et différent pour peser le plaisir, la conscience et jusqu'à la nature, quand par leurs architectes, leurs poètes, leurs teinturiers, il leur a donné à chacun un royaume opposé de volumes, de sons et de nuances, quand il leur a fait inventer le toit en charpente troyen et la voûte thébaine, le rouge phrygien et l'indigo grec, l'univers sait bien qu'il n'entend pas préparer ainsi aux hommes deux chemins de couleur et d'épanouissement, mais se ménager son festival, le déchaînement de cette brutalité et de cette folie humaines qui seules rassurent les dieux. C'est de la petite politique, j'en conviens. Mais nous sommes chefs d'État, nous pouvons bien entre nous deux le dire: c'est couramment celle du Destin.

Ulysse's final words indicate that both leaders feel powerless before this absurd situation. They have realized that man is not completely free. Although they understand, they cannot stop the forces at work. They know that an

---

7Giraudoux, op. cit., p. 171-172.
unjustified and meaningless death will be their ultimate
destination. Hector explains the logical conclusion of
adhering to absolutes when, speaking of the war, he says,
"Elle aura lieu."\(^8\)

The acceptance of an absurd death is seen in Anouilh's
play, Antigone. By accepting death in the name of an ab­solute, Antigone refuses to revolt against the absurd.

Anouilh's play Antigone may be viewed as:

l'aboutissement heureux et l'alliance des deux
lignes de forces qui animait jusqu'ici le théâtre
d'Anouilh: l'enfance, préservée du monde des
hommes, et le destin, qui ordonne la nature des
chose.s\(^9\)

The use by Anouilh of a young girl reinforces the idea of
purity and non-compromise. Dramatically, it is more effec­tive to have a young and pure girl destroyed by destiny.

Antigone yearns for an absolute value that is outside
the realm of reality. Guicharnaud says that "this suffering
leads to shame and acts of moral and physical self­destruction."\(^10\) Her refusal to compromise is seen when she
tells Créon:

Moi, je veux tout, tout de suite, -- et que ce soit
entier, -- ou alors je refuse! Je ne veux pas
être modeste, moi, et me contenter d'un petit
morceau si j'ai été bien sage. Je veux être
sure de tout aujourd'hui et que cela soit aussi

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 183.

\(^9\)Robert de Luppe, Jean Anouilh (Paris: Classiques du

\(^10\)Guicharnaud, op. cit., p. 122.
beau que quand j'étais petite - ou mourir.\textsuperscript{11}

Antigone is obstinate and this attitude causes her to see others as absurd. She thus arrives at a vision of the world as absurd and attempts to destroy the order of the world by revolting against Créon.

Créon realizes that Antigone wants all or nothing. He recognizes that she cannot live with compromise, and this is borne out when he says to the chorus, "Ce qui importait pour elle, c'était de refuser et de mourir."\textsuperscript{12}

Créon can accept imperfection and continue to live. He knows that compromise is a necessity, and that the harsh realities of existence must be accepted. He explains to Hémon:

\begin{quote}
Il faudra bien que tu acceptes Hémon. Chacun de nous a un jour, plus ou moins triste, plus ou moins lointain, où il doit enfin accepter d'être un homme. Pour toi, c'est aujourd'hui.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Créon is able to accept the human condition with all of its weaknesses and imperfections, whereas Antigone refuses to do so and suffers the fatal consequences. She, unlike Créon, cannot accept the life of compromise, and her act must be seen as a death wish because she knows her revolt is doomed to failure. Her revolt is negative and gratuitous. Her death can in no way be considered as

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{11}Jean Anouilh, \textit{Antigone} (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1947), p. 66.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 69.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 71.
\end{flushright}
justified, and this striving to remain pure appears ludicrous, as ludicrous as a Caligula who wants everyone to witness and live the absurd.

The encounter with the absurd reaches a new pinnacle with André Malraux. The protagonist has come a step further in his analysis and recognition of man's absurd condition; but the revolt against the absurd still remains an individual thing and is not proclaimed in the name of mankind. In Malraux, his heroes are intellectuals who are impelled by their metaphysical passion, conducting their life on the principle that there is no ultimate goal. The lack of any goal can only result in anguish on the part of the protagonist. Solitude becomes his existence and gives it meaning. His anguish is the result of an absurd world in which all men die, and he attempts to establish a feeling of fraternity with others by facing death together. It is thus proper that revolution play an important role in the works of Malraux. Henri Peyre says that for Malraux, "Revolution had provided a means of escaping temporarily from that absurdity (death); for it had afforded some men a little more hope, man's hope is his reason for living and for dying." 

In Malraux's novel, *Les Conquérants*, the protagonist Garine is portrayed as the intellectual hero who is aware

14 Glicksberg, op. cit., p. 96.
15 Henri Peyre, op. cit., p. 223.
of man's absurd condition. Even though he participates in the revolution, he still remains the individual. He cannot glorify causes and feel that the masses are the reasons for these causes. In fact, he is contemptuous of the masses. It is an individual effort on his part, and as André Maurois observes, "Garine needs to believe in the absurdity of the world." The encounter with the absurd is the individual's anguish, and not related to any space-time factor. In fact, the possibility exists that Garine could justify fighting for any cause, since the cause is sublimated to the higher struggle, that of the encounter with the absurd.

The weight of the absurd is always with him. Even in the hospital he says:

le sentiment de la vanité de toute vie, d'une humanité menée par des forces absurdes. Maintenant ça revient. . . . C'est idiot, la maladie. . . . Et pourtant, il me semble que je lutte contre l'absurde humain, en faisant ce que je fais ici. . . . L'absurde retrouve ses droits. . . .

He is unable to escape this feeling of absurdity, and it is only through action that he can make life palatable. His true feelings as revealed by Nicolaieff who says of him, "Il n'est pas communiste . . . il n'y a pas de place dans le communisme pour celui qui veut d'abord . . . être


lui-même, enfin, exister séparé des autres."18

Thus, it can be seen that Garine's position is one of the individual's struggle against a metaphysical problem. Neither ideologies nor the masses mean anything to him, and it is only through action that he can find moments that defeat the absurd. He is unlike a Dr. Rieux who revolts against the absurd in the name of humanity; thus, Garine's revolt is gratuitous and false.

La Nausée is Sartre's initial literary expression of the absurd. As Glicksberg says, "Sartre goes beyond Malraux in disclosing the total collapse of the absolute that compels man to endure the anguish of alienation in a universe bereft of meaning."19 All values that lie outside man are negated and the individual finds himself without external support.

The novel La Nausée is a diary kept by the hero, Antoine Roquetin. Solitude is the substance of his diary, and it is practically devoid of events. To exist in a void, deprived of any meaning reduces the individual to the same value as everything else:

La Nausée, c'est le sentiment d'exister, c'est l'existence réduite à se sentir exister; et c'est, corrélativement, le sentiment que tout existe.20


19Glicksberg, op. cit., p. 137.

The feeling thus becomes that one is "de trop," and anguish results from this feeling. The hero of the novel, who detests the bourgeois hypocrisy that he sees all around him, does nothing but live from day to day, unwilling to revolt against the absurd condition. He has discovered "la nausée", and he describes it as:

Nous étions un tas d'existants gênés, embarrassés de nous-mêmes, nous n'avions pas la moindre raison d'être là, ni les uns ni les autres, chaque existant, confus, vaguement inquiet, se sentait de trop par rapport aux autres. De trop: c'était le seul rapport que je pusse établir entre ces arbres, ces grilles, ces cailloux.  

Roquetin sees everything as "de trop." There is no reason why things should be as they are. After reaching this conclusion, Roquetin exhibits the full effect of the absurd when he states, "Et moi — veule, alangui, obscene, digérant, ballottant de mornes pensées — moi aussi j'étais de trop."

Roquetin has come to the logical conclusion that he also is unjustified. He is completely engulfed by the absurdity, and in despair says:

Mais ma mort même eût été de trop. De trop, mon cadavre, mon sang sur ces cailloux, entre ces plantes, au fond de ce jardin souriant. Et la chair rongée eût été de trop dans la terre qui l'eût reçue et mes os, enfin,

---

21Ibid., p. 125.


23Ibid., p. 182.
Thus, nothing justifies the existence of the individual. Such a conclusion results in a neutral attitude on the part of Roquetin. He feels "la nausée" because he is not justified. Life has no function and "la nausée" becomes a permanent state of being for Roquetin. He refuses to transcend the absurd through revolt, and thus his attitude is negative. His delicious feeling of solitude and superiority, neutralizes any attempt at revolt. Upon confronting the absurd, Roquetin assumes an anti-value.

In some of the works of Camus, the protagonist's encounter with the absurd also takes on a negative attitude. The basic problem for Camus is to decide if life is worth living. With Camus, the absurd results from the conflict between man's desire for immortality and the inevitability of death. This contradiction creates the feeling of despair that permeates many of Camus' heroes. The irrationality that exists between man and the universe is seen in the novel, *L'Etranger*. In this work, Camus explores the possibility of living in a vacuum where there is neither good nor evil, where one expression is as valid as any other.

The hero, Mersault, lives detached from other people and feels none of the responsibilities considered pertinent by society. On the first page of the novel, his basic

24 Ibid.
indifference is shown when he says, "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas."\(^{25}\) It really does not matter if it is today, tomorrow, or yesterday, because the repetition of sameness is always there, and death is just the logical conclusion to an absurd existence.

Meursault lives the banal monotonous everyday life and asks for nothing in return. He does not expect to have his life justified for him by religion or by any one. He has no particular purpose in life. All things are of equal value, and even an institution such as marriage is reduced to an event of no importance. This attitude is expressed in conversation between Meursault and Marie:

Le soir, Marie est venue me chercher et m'a demandé si je voulais me marier avec elle, J'ai dit que cela m'était égal et que nous pourrions le faire si elle le voulait. Elle a voulu savoir alors si je l'aimais. J'ai répondu comme je l'avais déjà fait une fois, que cela ne signifiait rien mais que sans doute je ne l'aimait pas. "Pourquoi m'épouser alors?" a-t-elle dit. Je lui ai expliqué que cela n'avait aucune importance et que si elle le désirait, nous pouvions nous marier.\(^{26}\)

Institutions that are considered sacred to society are of no value for Meursault. He neither affirms nor denies the importance of anything, but rather accepts what happens to him, rather than making his own destiny. Concerning the end of the novel, critic Phillip H. Rhein points out that:

Meursault's wish to be greeted by cries of execration at the end of the novel are no more


\(^{26}\)Ibid., p. 64.
than a total recognition of the absurd and all its consequences as they are developed through the complicated reasoning of Le Mythe de Sisyphe. 27

Even though there is an affirmation for the physical life at the end of the novel, it does not represent a true revolt against the absurd, as it is not a statement in the name of mankind.

In 1944, two years after the publication of L'Etranger, Camus published a play entitled Caligula. In the play, he pushes the confrontation with the absurd to its logical conclusion. Everything is arbitrary since death is inevitable. Caligula represents "l'homme absurde." In his personal attempt to transform the world, he becomes a kind of apostle of the absurd. He ensures that all shall be forced to recognize through him, the absurdity of the world. 28 Caligula is an anti-value. He discovers the absurd because of death. He recognizes that "Les hommes meurent et ils ne sont pas heureux." 29 He is aware of the impossibility of happiness on this earth.

Ce monde tel qu'il est fait, n'est pas supportable. J'ai donc besoin de la lune, ou du bonheur, ou de l'immortalité, de quelque chose qui soit dément peut-être, mais qui ne soit pas de ce monde. 30


28 Ibid., p. 47.


The moon is Caligula's unattainable absolute. Since his dreams and desires will never be consumated, he wants to destroy the illusions of happiness that man might have. His desire is that:

Alors, c'est que tout, autour de moi, est mensonge, et moi, je veux qu'on vive dans la vérité! Et justement, j'ai les moyens de les faire vivre dans la vérité. Car je sais ce qui leur manque, Hélicon. Ils sont privés de la connaissance et il leur manque un professeur qui sache ce dont il parle. 31

If the Gods permit death, Caligula feels that he has the right to create the absurd here on earth. He assumes the role of the Gods, and if the human condition is absurd, he will implement its program. He pushes his logic to its ultimate conclusion: he kills in order to destroy the lie that men are happy.

Caligula renders the absurd visible, but fails to recognize that he is not solving the problem, because killing people does not remove the irrationality of human existence. Thus, Caligula represents a negative revolt against the absurd.

The visible rendering of the absurd becomes more pronounced with Samuel Beckett. With him, the absurd is no longer presented in rational terms, but rather the irrationality of the absurd itself is presented on stage. In Beckett, the spirit of nihilism is reborn. His characters are hopelessly lost and are without identities. They are

31Ibid., p. 27.
waiting for life to happen to them as they ridiculously
repeat mundane trivia that characterize their existence.
Frederick J. Hoffman, when speaking of the play, \textit{En Attendant Godot}, says:

Simple events, hopelessly trivial in themselves,
in repetitive form become metaphysically fearsome.
The major repetition is of course that of Act Two,
which describes, with variations of some importance,
the landscape, the characters, and the motions of
Act One. This is to say that life will continue
without much change, that expectations of change
are generally disappointed, and that the line of

Even the stage decor aids in presenting an alienated
absurd condition. There is no indication of where the play
is taking place. It thus has to be anywhere and everywhere.
Events occur in the time between birth and death. It is as
Martin Esslin clearly sees that, "The subject of the play
is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential

Waiting is indicative of a crisis. In \textit{En Attendant Godot}, Vladimir and Estragon just wait. They are unable to
act, waiting for an exterior force to decide, to choose for
them:

\begin{flushright}
Vladimir: Alors quoi faire? \\
Estragon: Ne faisons rien, C'est plus
\end{flushright}
The prudent thing to do is to accept "Godot." Waiting without questioning is acceptance of the absurd which entails a negative attitude.

Estragon is seen to be the more lucid of the two. He realizes to a certain degree their dependency and adherence to the absurd:

VLADIMIR: Lié?
ESTRAGON: Lié.
VLADIMIR: Comment lié?
ESTRAGON: Pieds et poings.
VLADIMIR: Mais à qui? Par qui?
ESTRAGON: A ton bonhomme.
VLADIMIR: A Godot? Lié à Godot?
           Quelle idée! Jamais de la vie.35

They will never be able to break away from their role of object because they will never revolt against the absurd. At the end of the play they are still wondering whether or not to leave. Their decision is expressed by Vladimir: "Il nous punirait. Seul l'arbre vit."36

They accept man's absurd condition. The play ends as it began, with the players waiting. There is no conclusion or frame of reference in the play. Nothing meaningful has

35Ibid., p. 32.
36Ibid., p. 161.
been said about life because life is devoid of all meaning. The only sure reality is death. The dependency on Godot reduces Vladimir and Estragon to objects, and objects do not revolt against the absurd.

The destruction of the individual is completed in the theater of Ionesco. Except in the Béranger cycle, the individual has completely disappeared, and language, the means of communication, disintegrated. Ionesco's characters have no reference by which they can define themselves, and therefore act in a ridiculous manner. The effect may seem farcical, but as Mary Metz indicates, "the comic wedded to the tragic is a universal feature of the avant-garde theater." 37

The tragic, presented in an absurd way on stage, is explained by Guicharnaud:

> By giving absurd fantasies the concrete and obvious properties of ordinary reality, Ionesco's theater shows reality to be equally absurd. 38

The presentation of the absurd in concrete form appears in many ways in Ionesco's theater. In the play, La Cantatrice Chauve, the characters are completely disoriented. They lack a point of reference with which they can establish their identities. Reality is dislocated and the juxtaposition of inharmonious opposites creates a tension that destroys any remote possibility of arriving at any rational

37 Mary S. Metz, Existentialism and Inauthenticity in the Theater of Beckett, Ionesco and Genet (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Louisiana State University, Thesis (Ph.D), p. 120.

38 Guicharnaud, op. cit., p. 218.
conclusion. Even the normal sequential movement of time is destroyed.

At one point in the play, Monsieur and Madame Smith are discussing the death of Bobby Watson, about which Monsieur Smith has just read in the newspaper:

M. SMITH: Tiens, c'est écrit que Bobby Watson est mort.

Mme SMITH: Mon Dieu, le pauvre, quand est-ce qu'il est mort?

M. SMITH: Pourquoi prends-tu cet air étonné? Tu le savais bien. Il est mort il y a deux ans. Tu te rappelles, on a été à son enterrement, il y a un an et demi.39

The conversation continues, and the date of Bobby Watson's death changes several times. This uncertainty is disturbing enough, but even more disconcerting is the conversation about Bobby Watson that quickly follows:

Mme SMITH: Et quand pensent-ils se marier, tous les deux?

M. SMITH: Le printemps prochain, au plus tard.40

The presentation of the impossible situation of a reportedly dead man marrying disturbs our view of the orderly progression of time in which one event is the logical result of another. Monsieur and Madame Smith are indicating to us that time is of no consequence and certain events are not necessarily the logical result of other events. Their


40Ibid., p. 23.
world is a timeless reality in which the most that they do is sit around and repeat endless prattle.

An example of raising absurd trivia to a level of importance can be seen when Madame Martin relates to the others an incident that she observed. She tells the others that she saw an old man bending over. They press her to explain what he was doing, and she answers:

Mme MARTIN: Il nouait les lacets de sa chaussure qui s'étaient défaits.¹¹

Mundane things have assumed a place of prominence in the lives of the Smiths and Martins. They are able to escape the burden of an absurd reality by participating in the absurd itself. They are objects, and readily accept their roles and the games that are required by these roles.

At one point in the play, the doorbell rings three times, and each time the door is opened, no one is there. Only after it rings the fourth time is someone there. It is their old friend the fireman. Instead of accepting the mysterious rings as a part of the unknown, these people attempt to build a philosophical system out of an inconsequential value:

Mme SMITH: L'expérience nous apprend que lorsqu'on entend sonner à la porte, c'est qu'il n'y a jamais personne.¹²

The system is established on principles that are illogical to man's normal processes. The need to explain ends

¹¹Ibid., p. 35.
¹²Ibid., p. 37.
up in confusion and an absurd compromise is reached:

M. MARTIN: En somme, nous ne savons toujours pas si, lorsqu'on sonne à la porte, il y a quelqu'un ou non!

Mme. SMITH: Jamais personne.

M. SMITH: Toujours quelqu'un.

LE POMPIER: Je vais vous mettre d'accord. Vous avez un peu raison tous les deux. Lorsqu'on sonne à la porte, des fois il y a quelqu'un, d'autres fois il n'y a personne.

The Smiths and Martins refuse to accept the fact that reality cannot be explained. They want a reason for everything, even if it means destroying the processes by which man views reality. The use of logic to explain the unexplainable is Ionesco's indictment of those who build philosophical explanations of reality.

The characters of the play are quite similar to Vladimir and Estragon in that much of their time is spent repeating obvious facts.

M. MARTIN: Le plafond est en haut, le plancher est en bas.

Mme. SMITH: Quand je dis oui, c'est une façon de parler.

Mme MARTIN: A chacun son destin.

M. SMITH: Prenez un cercle, caressez-le, il deviendra vicieux.

It is as Jean Vannier clearly sees, that "Ionesco is attacking a clearly defined language: a language made up

---

43 Ibid., p. 40.
44 Ibid., p. 52.
of clichés and ready-made formulas, which is that of an alienated society.\textsuperscript{45}

These alienated people have been cut off from the past and have no concept of future. They exist as objects in an absurd world and will never assume the responsibility of revolt.

In \textit{La Leçon}, Ionesco again uses types that are controlled by others and yet are unaware of their puppet-like nature. In the stage instructions, Ionesco shows physically what will also happen mentally to the female student:

\begin{quote}
elle deviendra progressivement triste, morose; très vivant au début, elle sera de plus en plus fatiguée, somnolente; vers la fin du drame sa figure devra exprimer nettement une dépression nerveuse.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

By contrast, in the same stage instructions, the professor will become more vicious and dominating until:

\begin{quote}
le professeur deviendra de plus en plus sur de lui, nerveux, agressif, dominateur, jusqu'à se jouer comme il lui plaira de son élève, devenue, entre ses mains, une pauvre chose.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

He will continue to become aggressive, until at the end of the play, he kills the girl. He makes the ultimate absurd, death, a reality for her.

The same importance on factual knowledge that was seen


\textsuperscript{46}Ionesco, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., p. 61.
in *La Cantatrice Chauve* is displayed in *La Leçon*. It is manifested in its extreme when the professor asks the student:

```
combien font, par example, trois milliards sept cent cinquante-cinq millions neuf cent quatre-vingt-dix-huit mille deux cent cinquante et un, multiplié par cinq milliards cent soixante-deux millions trois cent trois mille cinq cent huit? 48
```

Incredibly, she quickly gives the correct answer. She had memorized all the possible results of all the possible multiplications. She can do this, but she is unable to reason. She has always been object, living in a non-thinking reality.

There is no possible communication between the student and the professor. It is as Esslin states:

```
The play demonstrates the basic impossibility of communication — words cannot convey meanings because they leave out of account the personal associations they carry for each individual. 49
```

The Professor cannot comprehend that the student has a toothache, and she cannot understand his reasoning on such things as philology. This leads to alienation and to destructive impulses on the part of the professor. Her death is as absurd as the events leading up to it.

Ionesco’s theater demonstrates the destruction of the individual. He is alienated from others and finds communication a hopeless endeavor. He attempts no revolt against the absurd, since he is oblivious to his role as object.

---

48 *ibid.*, p. 73.

49 *Esslin, op. cit.*, p. 95.
The authors covered in this chapter have been shown to present protagonists who do not revolt against the absurd. Even though their works are from different times, they exhibit a common factor -- that of man, helpless before an absurd existence. In the following chapter, the poetry of Jacques Prévert will be examined in order to determine if he also views man before the absurd.
CHAPTER TWO

JACQUES PRÉVERT'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE ABSURD

Even though the poetry of Jacques Prévert coincides with ideas expressed by some of the writers of the twentieth century, he does not espouse a particular philosophy, nor is he a member of any specific group. As Raymond Queneau notes:

Prévert n'est pas non plus un prophète surréaliste, ni un philosophe existentialiste. Il est quelqu'un de rare: un homme authentique, un homme qui voit le monde comme il est.¹

He presents man in the face of the absurdity of the human condition, and in this presentation, the absurd is given concrete form. Man is presented in a grotesque manner because he functions inauthentically. He and his institutions are painted with exaggeration in order to more dramatically achieve the feeling of the absurd. Prévert's use of caricature focuses on the dehumanized individual, unable to act, manipulated by institutions over which he has no control. This same technique of exaggeration and caricature is employed by Ionesco for the same dramatic effect. Prévert's use of caricature is explained by Léon Gros:

C'est précisément parce que notre régime social a fait de l'homme une caricature de l'homme, et

a si bien compromis toutes les valeurs qu'elles sont suspectes.\textsuperscript{2}

The use of caricature is the portrayal of man before an absurd universe in which he is lost and without hope. He is bewildered by the complexity of things and monotonously completes the mundane tasks of everyday existence.

The purpose of this dissertation is not to emphasize isolated criticism of certain aspects of society by Prévert, but rather to show that this criticism makes up the poet's vision of the world, a vision that coincides with that of some of his contemporaries. Thus, when some of his poems are examined, it will be seen that a correlation does indeed exist between Jacques Prévert and other writers of the twentieth century, and that his vision of the world corresponds to the vision of an absurd existence. Even though this idea is not intellectually expressed by the poet, as in the case of Ionesco, it will be seen that Prévert presents the absurd in similar ways, and at times; employs similar devices to aid his presentation.

In order to give form to the absurd, the poet must rely on the expressions of the absurd that are tangible. Thus, Prévert attacks institutions such as war, the church, and governments which are representatives of oppressive powers that reduce man to an inauthentic being. Under the guise of social criticism, he is describing the human condition;

that of man confronted by the absurd.

In the poems that will be discussed, alienated people will be seen who act as puppets, living in a world of illusion. Most of the characters treated in Prévert's poetry are called "quelqu'un, la femme, l'enfant, monsieur," etc. This is Prévert's way of showing depersonalized man who passively awaits the ultimate absurdity, death. These people accept rather than revolt against the absurd. They feel powerless to act against the institutions that oppress them. Revolt, and Prévert's solution to the absurd, will be examined in a later chapter.

The possibility of revolt indicates that Prévert feels that certain absurdities of this world are preventable through means of reform. Death remains the ultimate absurdity, and even though man's existence may be devoid of meaning, this does not justify the exploitation of others. All acts are not of equal value. Man is of the utmost importance, and anything that reduces him to object or hastens his death is a negative value.

Since death is the ultimate absurdity of the human condition, it stands to reason that much of Prévert's poetry would be devoted to the institutions that cause death, and the greatest perpetrator of death is war. In war, man is reduced to a mechanical object who helplessly follows absurd abstractions that lead to an unjustified death.

With war, patriotism becomes all important, and the individual is swept along in the current of the cause.
Whether or not he agrees with the cause is irrelevant, because the cause takes precedence over individual opinion. The individual is rendered impotent in the face of overwhelming odds, and must helplessly participate in an absurd situation.

Even though Prévert attacks the institution of war, he is using it as a means to convey the idea that man is himself faced with an absurd condition that transcends its manifestations, such as war. The death and destruction that result from war are tangibles that convey the feeling of the absurd. Man accepts this absurdity, and even goes to the extreme of glorifying the heroes of war.3

In the poem, "Le Baptême de l'Air,"4 a certain street has been renamed in the honor of a dead war hero, but it is still the same street.

Cette rue
autrefois on l'appelait la rue du Luxembourg
à cause du jardin
Aujourd'hui on l'appelle la rue Guynemer
à cause d'un aviateur mort à la guerre
Pourtant
cette rue
c'est toujours la même rue
c'est toujours le même jardin
c'est toujours le Luxembourg
Avec les terrasses...les statues...les bassins
Avec les arbres
les arbres vivants

3"L'Epopée", "Confession Publique", "Tout s'en allait," "Dehors", and "Sceaux d'Hommes Egaux Morts" are several other examples in which Prévert shows the ludicrous nature of war.

Avec les oiseaux
les oiseaux vivants
Avec les enfants
tous les enfants vivants
Alors on se demande
on se demande vraiment
ce qu'un aviateur mort vient foutre là-dedans.

The word dead is contrasted with the word living in order to show the ridiculous priorities of man. War equals death and is therefore a negative value; whereas birds, trees and children are positive values. The question thus arises as to why does man not revolt against negative values, and instead of honoring that which represents death and destruction, emphasize the positive values of life. But this will not occur because symbols, such as statues of dead war heroes, create the illusion of justification, justification that is based upon abstractions.

In the short play, La Bataille de Fontenoy, negative values win out over life. The curtain rises to the music of the "Marseillaise," and as the play begins, Edouard Hérriot says:

Mesdames, Messieurs et chers enfants, Dans l'ordre extérieur, l'essentielle pensée du Gouvernement c'est la paix et pour nous la guerre doit être considérée comme un crime collectif... comme un crime collectif!!!
Et l'on s'étonne que la Morale et la Justice si utilement sévères pour l'homicide, se montrent si négligentes ou si oubliées pour les chefs politiques coupables de décider le massacre des peuples....

Everyone applauds, and he continues:

...L'esprit français... Et ceux qui ne

The atmosphere of peace has prevailed and the crowd affirms life. But soon thereafter, the English Lord Hay and the Comte d'Auteroche enter and the spectators become enthusiastic as they cry out:

Ah! la bataille va commencer!

A ridiculous dialogue takes place between the Lord and the Comte, and the spectators begin to wave their handkerchiefs as they get caught up with the idea of battle.

But, it is the soldiers who will be the victims, and they can be heard in the corridor:

Adieu Paris, Adieu l'Amour,
Adieu toutes les femmes
C'est pour la vie, c'est pour toujours
De cette guerre infame...
C'est à Craonne sur le plateau
Qu'on s'fera trouver la peau,
C'est nous les condamnés,
C'est nous les sacrifiés...

One of the soldiers deserts, and a woman who is knitting is heard to say:

Oh! La bataille n'a pas encore commencé et voilà déjà un déserteur!

The deserter runs to his mother and begs her to hide him, but she answers:

Mon fils, un déserteur!... Mais qu'est-ce que vont dire les voisins!... C'est la honte sur la famille, le déshonneur!... Misérable, tu vas rater le mariage de ta sœur!

She has allowed exterior values to determine her choice, and she wants her son to act in the same manner, never questioning established values. Her son is shot and she is
"un peu triste malgré tout," but she will never revolt against the situation.

Nicholas II and Rasputine arrive on the scene, and they, along with others, praise heroism and war. All negative values are emphasized.

Poincaré then appears, and in a conversation with the secretary, shows the absurdity that soldiers face.

Poincaré

...Et j'ai laissé passer les heures. Où en sommes-nous? Combien y a-t-il de morts?

Poincaré

Diable, diable, nous ne sommes pas d'accord...

Le Secrétaire

Avec les blessés, vous aurez peut-être votre compte.

Poincaré

Nous verrons ça à tête reposée. Avez-vous vu la maquette?

Le Secrétaire

Quelle maquette, Monsieur le Président?

Poincaré

La maquette du monument aux morts de Fontenoy, parbleu! Je l'ai vue, elle est superbe, un peu trop moderne à mon avis, un peu cubiste même. Mais il faut bien les gâter un peu, ces chers petits, c'est de leur âge!... Soldats tombés à Fontenoy, soldats tombés à Fontenoy, sachez que vous n'êtes pas tombés dans l'oreille d'un sourd et que je fais ici le serment de vous venger, de vous suivre, et de périr, etc... etc...

The soldiers are nothing more than statistics for which obscene monuments will be built in the honor of their numbers.
The absurdity is further reinforced when Poincaré later says:

... Soldats tombés à Fontenoy, le soleil d'Austerlitz vous contemple... À la guerre comme à la guerre! Un militaire de perdu, dix de retrouvés!! Il faut des civils pour faire des militaires!!! Avec un civil vivant on fait un soldat mort!!!! Et pour les soldats morts on fait des monuments!!!! Des monuments aux morts!!!!!

He is living the absurd as he is out of touch with reality. The symbols of war have replaced the values of life, and he rationalizes this by building monuments to the dead.

Krupp enters upon the scene and says:

Monsieur le Président
Nous sommes désolés
Mais les munitions
On les a mélangées,
Ça va faire mauvais effet!...

But this presents no problem as Poincaré explains:

Mais non, ça ne fait rien. Les obus français et les obus allemands sont de la même famille. Vous n'avez qu'à partager.

Thus, it is no longer a question of right and wrong, or of patriotism, but the simple fact of the importance of war. The illusions created by Poincaré are now determining his choice, and the negative value of war has triumphed.

News is brought of an armistice, and the spectators call for Victory who appears and hears them shout:

Gloire à notre France éternelle!
Gloire à ceux qui sont morts pour elle!
Gloire à Dieu au plus haut des cieux!

Thus, God, patriotism and victory are synonymous terms, one as absurd as the other.

The need to be victorious is shown to be an absurdity
of man when Victory speaks to the crowd.

Des cieux . . . des cieux . . .
Ceux qui ne font pas d'omelette
sans casser les œufs
ont droit qu'à leur cercueil
la foule vienne et prie! . . .
Eh! Bonjour Monsieur du Corbeau . . .
J'en connais d'immortels
qui sont de purs sanglots . . .
Fesse queue doigt . . .
Advienne que pourri . . .
Advienne que pourra . . .
Tirez la boînette
la chevillette cherra
Etcaetera! . . . Etcaetera! . . .

The speech by Victory deteriorates into incoherent confusion, indicating that victory does not render a rational justification for war. War remains a ludicrous institution.

Even though the war is over, the play ends with the spectators shouting:

Remettez-nous ça! Remettez-nous ça!
Remettez-nous ça! Remettez-nous ça!

The characters who appear in the play are symbols of war, and the spectators enthusiastically endorse these symbols. Monuments to the war dead are symbols of justification. Just as in Giraudoux's play, *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* where Hélène is used to justify the war, so it is here that symbols have replaced man's responsibility to act authentically. The people act mechanically as they follow the abstract beauty of war. They do not revolt against the absurd situation, accepting values not created by themselves. War has dehumanized them, and as a result, their reaction supports violence, a negation of the
importance of man. Violence and death are negative qualities that render the absurd visible.

War is not the only institution that prevents the individual from acting authentically. Man's failure to act\(^6\) also results from a resigned attitude of "c'est la vie," and that there is nothing that he can do to change this.

This failure to act can be seen in the poem, "Familiales."\(^7\)

La mère fait du tricot
Le fils fait la guerre
Elle trouve ça tout naturel la mère
Et le père qu'est-ce qu'il fait le père?
Il fait des affaires
Sa femme fait du tricot
Son fils la guerre
Lui des affaires
Il trouve ça tout naturel le père.
Et le fils et le fils
Qu'est-ce qu'il trouve le fils?
Il ne trouve rien absolument rien le fils
Le fils sa mère fait du tricot son père des affaires lui la guerre
Quand il aura fini la guerre
Il fera des affaires avec son père
La guerre continue la mère continue elle tricote
Le père continue il fait des affaires
le fils est tué il ne continue pas
Le père et la mère vont au cimetière
Ils trouvent ça naturel le père et la mère
La vie continue la vie avec le tricot la guerre les affaires
Les affaires la guerre le tricot la guerre
Les affaires les affaires et les affaires
La vie avec le cimetière.

\(^6\)"La Trouette ou les grandes Inventions," and "Le Controleur," are other examples in which Prévert shows those who fail to act.

The people are painted as marionettes. They accept what is imposed upon them. Everyone finds it natural to continue in such a manner, and even though there is a hint of bewilderment on the part of the son, it is seen that after the war, he plans to take his place beside his father.

Habit has reduced these people to object. They do not question the structure that has been imposed upon them. Habit reaches its absurd pinnacle as the parents find it quite natural to visit the cemetery and never revolt against the cause of their visits.

The poem ends on a note of despair because man continues to accept his absurd condition and does not revolt against it.

In a shorter poem, "Le Droit Chemin," the habitual continuation of resignation is seen.

A chaque kilomètre
chaque année
des vieillards au front borné
indiquent aux enfants la route
d'un geste de ciment armé.

It would seem that past experience would cause the "vieillards" to point out a different route; but the poet emphasizes that this will not happen by the use of the term "ciment armé." The only available route is the way of despair, and there is no indication in the poem that man will revolt against the absurd in the name of mankind.

The theme of hopelessness is further explored in the

---

8Prévert, Paroles, p. 155.
poem "Chanson des Sardinières."9

Tournez tournez
petites filles
tournez autour des fabriques
bientôt vous serez dedans
tournez tournez
filles des pecheurs
filles des paysans

Les fées qui sont venues
autour de vos berceaux
les fées étaient payées
par les gens du château
elles vous ont dit l'avenir
et il n'était pas beau

Vous vivrez malheureuses
et vous aurez beaucoup d'enfants
beaucoup d'enfants
qui vivront malheureux
et qui auront beaucoup d'enfants
qui vivront malheureux
et qui auront beaucoup d'enfants
beaucoup d'enfants
qui vivront malheureux
et qui auront beaucoup d'enfants
beaucoup d'enfants
beaucoup d'enfants...

Tournez tournez
petites filles
tournez autour des fabriques
bientôt vous serez dedans
tournez tournez
filles des pecheurs
filles des paysans.

Prévert presents a picture of a suppressed people10
who live by habit, never transcending their role of object.
They will continue in their absurd manner, and will have
children who will continue to perpetuate the role of object.
The use of repetition in the poem intensifies the feeling

9 Prévert, Spectacle, p. 155-156.

10 Hopelessness and suppression are also seen in "Souvenir," "Où Je vais, d'où Je viens...," and "Rue de Rivoli."
of futility. Even though the situation could be remedied by positive acts of revolt, the poet's use of the future tense, "vivront, auront," implies acceptance of suppression. Despair is the result, and the implication is that revolt will never occur.

The idea of futility is expressed well in the poem, "L'Effort Humain." Even though Prévert, "parle et chante comme le peuple," he is showing through the use of the proletariat the human condition, and this poem is a good summation of man in an absurd world.

The real world is a world of suffering in which men die unjustified deaths. The human effort:

n'est pas ce beau jeune homme souriant debout sur sa jambe de plâtre ou de pierre et donnant grace aux puérils artifices du statuaire l'imbécile illusion de la joie de la danse et de la jubilation évoquant avec l'autre jambe en l'air la douceur du retour à la maison

The statues are artificial realities created by a smug bourgeoisie. Words such as "joie" and "jubilation" are illusions. These words have no meaning in the depressing world of the proletariat. Such illusions are not a part of his world.

True reality for the suppressed class is entirely

11 The theme of futility is also exhibited in other poems such as, "Marche ou Crève" and "En Été comme en Hiver."

12 Prévert, Paroles, p. 93-95.

different.

L'effort humain porte un bandage herniaire et les cicatrices des combats livrés par la classe ouvrière contre un monde absurde et sans lois
L'effort humain n'a pas de vraie maison il sent l'odeur de son travail et il est touché aux poumons son salaire est maigre ses enfants aussi

The proletariat's world is an environment of suppression. He struggles in an absurd situation over which he has no control. Under such circumstances, he reacts in the following manner.

il se nourrit de mauvais rêves et il se saoule avec le mauvais vin de la resignation et comme un grand écureuil ivre sans arrêt il tourne en rond dans un univers hostile poussiéreux et bas de plafond et il forge sans cesse la chaîne la terrifiante chaîne où tout s'enchaîne

He is reduced to object by institutions he cannot comprehend. He is exploited on all sides as he finds himself in a hostile world created by the ruling class.

The proletariat is faced with numerous "têtes."

la tête du grand emmerdeur
la tête de l'agressif pacificateur
la tête policière du grand libérateur
la tête d'Adolf Hitler
la tête de monsieur Thiers
la tête du dictateur
la tête du fusilleur de n'importe quel pays de n'importe quelle couleur
la tête odieuse
la tête malheureuse
la tête à claques
la tête à massacre
la tête de la peur.
These "têtes" crush him into his state of misery. His encounter with the absurd is not on a metaphysical level, but rather it is rendered visible by the institutions that exploit him.

The visible manifestations of the absurd presented by the poet imply that there is a solution to the physical problems of the human condition. But, the rendering of the absurd visible indicates that the idea of absurdity permeates the human condition.

Even though there is the possibility of ameliorating visible physical absurdities, the ultimate absurdity, death, cannot be avoided. Man can revolt against death in the name of mankind, or he can passively wait for death.

The theme of waiting is an important aspect of the absurd. Waiting implies lack of purpose and inability to revolt. In the poem, "Le Bouquet," passivity permeates the atmosphere.

Que faites-vous là petite fille
Avec ces fleurs fraîchement coupées
Que faites-vous là jeune fille
Avec ces fleurs ces fleurs séchées
Que faites-vous là jolie femme
Avec ces fleurs qui se fanent
Que faites-vous là vieille femme
Avec ces fleurs qui meurent
J'attends le vainqueur.

In describing the flowers, Prévert's use of terms such as "séchées," "se fanent" and "meurent" reinforces the idea

The idea of waiting can also be seen in a poem such as "J'attends."

Prevert, Paroles, p. 198.
of movement toward death. Death is the ultimate absurd, and the only thing the girl can do is "attendre le vainquer."

The use of a child by the poet implies innocence; but innocence is no defense against the absurd. Man is condemned to death, and as the poem indicates, he will passively await it. There is no reason for man's death, and instead of revolting against this absurdity he hopelessly awaits the end. As in Beckett's *En Attendant Godot*, waiting is seen as the human condition.

Death is the final absurdity, and in the poem, "Le Message,"

La porte que quelqu'un a ouverte
La porte que quelqu'un a refermée
La chaise où quelqu'un s'est assis
Le chat que quelqu'un a caressé
Le fruit que quelqu'un a mordu
La lettre que quelqu'un a lue
La chaise que quelqu'un a renversée
La porte que quelqu'un a ouverte
La route où quelqu'un court encore
Le bois que quelqu'un traverse
La rivière où quelqu'un se jette
L'hôpital où quelqu'un est mort.

Prévert lists things people normally do. But in the last line of the poem, everyone, like the small girl, faces man's greatest absurdity. He cannot escape the inevitable of a life devoid of meaning.

There are those who do not revolt against the absurd, and there are those who take the absurd to its logical conclusion. The poem, "Le Sultan."

---


Dans les montagnes de Cachemire
Vit le sultan de Salamandragore
Le jour il fait tuer un tas de monde
Et quand vient le soir il s'endort
Mais dans ses cauchemars les morts se cachent
Et le dévorent
Alors une nuit il se réveille
En poussant un grand cri
Et le bourreau tiré de son sommeil
Arrive souriant au pied du lit
S'il n'y avait pas de vivants
Dit le sultan
Il n'y aurait pas de morts
Et le bourreau répond d'accord
Que tout le reste y passe alors
Et qu'on n'en parle plus
D'accord dit le bourreau
C'est tout ce qu'il sait dire
Et tout le reste y passe comme le sultan l'a dit
Les femmes les enfants les siens et ceux des autres
Le veau le loup la guêpe et la douce brebis
Le bon sieillard intégre et le sobre chameau
Les actrices des théâtres le roi des animaux
Les planteurs de bananes les faiseurs de bons mots
Et les coqs et leurs poules les œufs avec leur coque
Et personne ne reste pour enterrer quiconque
Comme ça ça va
Dit le sultan de Salamandragore
Mais reste là bourreau
Là tout près de moi
Et tue-moi
Si jamais je me rendors.

Instead of revolting against the absurd in the name of mankind, the Sultan reacts in the same way as Caligula. Since death is the ultimate absurd, the Sultan will destroy any illusion of happiness by causing all living things to experience death. He represents those who cannot accept the absurd and react through destruction. The futility of his act is apparent because of the absurd will continue to exist, and even the idea of man will lack justification.

Confrontation with the absurd also produces other phenomena in man; that of isolation and fear that cannot be
overcome through reason.

In the poem, "Un Beau Matin," man is seen as isolated and afraid.

Il n'avait peur de personne
Il n'avait peur de rien
Mais un matin un beau matin
Il croit voir quelque chose
Mais il dit Ce n'est rien
Et il avait raison
Avec sa raison sans nul doute
Ce n'était rien
Mais le matin ce même matin
Il croit entendre quelqu'un
Et il ouvrit la porte
Et il la referma en disant Personne
Et il avait raison
Avec sa raison sans nul doute
Il n'y avait personne
Mais soudain il eût peur
Et il comprit qu'il était seul
Mais qu'il n'était pas tout seul
Et c'est alors qu'il vit
Rien en personne devant lui.

At the beginning of the poem, he is seen as confident because he is not afraid. His rational approach to life answers all of his questions. But, one beautiful morning he feels the full weight of isolation.

He attempts to use his reason to establish logically how this came about; but suddenly reason fails him and he experiences the anguish of existence. Logical philosophical systems that attempt to explain man's existence are of no consequence in the face of isolation. He sees others around him, but he feels and intuitively knows that he is alone, isolated before the void.

Isolation and fear are also expressed in the poem,

18Prévert, Histoires et d'autres histoires, p. 133-134.
"J'en ai vu plusiers . . ."19

J'en ai vu un qui s'était assis sur le chapeau
d'un autre
il était pale
il tremblait
il attendait quelque chose...n'importe quoi...
la guerre...la fin du monde...
il lui était absolument impossible de faire un
geste ou de parler
et l'autre
l'autre qui cherchait "son" chapeau était plus
pâle encore
et lui aussi tremblait
et se répétait sans cesse:
mon chapeau...mon chapeau...
et il avait envie de pleurer.
J'en ai vu un qui lisait les journaux
j'en ai vu un qui saluait le drapeau
j'en ai vu un qui était habillé de noir
il avait une montre
une chaîne de montre
un porte-monnaie
la légion d'honneur
et un pince-nez.
J'en ai vu un qui tirait son enfant par la main
et qui criait...
j'en ai vu un avec un chien
j'en ai vu un avec une canne à épée
j'en ai vu un qui pleurait
j'en ai vu un qui entrait dans une église
j'en ai vu un autre qui en sortait...

In the poems, "Le Bouquet," "Un Beau Matin," and "J'en
ai vu plusiers . . .," we see the metaphysical encounter with
the absurd. In these particular poems, man is seen before
the void, aware of his finitude. We have transcended the
physical visible absurd, and have come face to face with
the existential anguish of finitude.

Man is afraid in face of the absurd. He refuses to
act, preferring to wait for anything. To pass the time,
these people, like Vladimir and Estragon, go through

meaningless gestures such as looking for a hat or saluting the flag. These are futile attempts to escape the feeling of anguish, and as Anne Hyde Greet says, "Prévert's poetic practice suggests that life is a series of gratuitous actions achieved in a dehumanized universe."²⁰

Isolation is further intensified by the breakdown of communication. In the poem, "L'Addition,"²¹ logic is used to show the illogic of language.

Le Client

Garçon, l'addition!

Le Garçon

Voilà. (Il sort son crayon et note). Vous avez... deux oeufs durs, un veau, un petit pois, une asperge, un fromage avec beurre, une amande verte, un café filtre, un téléphone.

Le Client

Et puis des cigarettes!

Le Garçon

(Il commence à compter)

C'est ça même ... des cigarettes ... ... Alors ça fait ...

Le Client

N'insistez pas, mon ami, c'est inutile, vous ne réussirez jamais.

Le Garçon

!!!


²¹Prévert, Histoires et d'autres histoires, p. 80-82.
Le Client

On ne vous a donc pas appris à l'école que c'est ma-thé-ma-ti-que-ment impossible d'additionner des choses d'espèce différente!

Le Garçon

!!!

Le Client

(élevant la voix)

Enfin, tout de même, de qui se moque-t-on?... Il faut réellement être insensé pour oser essayer de tenter d"additionner" un veau avec des cigarettes, des cigarettes avec un café filtre, un café filtre avec une amande verte et des œufs durs avec des petits pois, des petits pois avec un téléphone ... Pourquoi pas un petit pois avec un grand officier de la Légion d'Honneur, pendant que vous y êtes? (Il se lève).

Non, mon ami, croyez-moi, n'insistez pas, ne vous fatiguez pas, ça ne donnerait rien, vous entendez, rien, absolument rien . . . pas même le pourboire!

(Ét il sort en emportant le rond de serviette à titre gracieux.)

Communication has broken down and normal behavioral patterns are destroyed. Prévert shows that the role of reason has been vastly overexaggerated and can even lead to bondage. 22 The client has created a philosophical system based on reason, and through this system, he dominates the waiter. When the possibility of understanding is destroyed, domination is the natural result.

22Anne Hyde Greet, op. cit., p. 140.
The domination of others is also seen in the poem entitled, "Le Retour à la Maison."  

Chanson Des Enfants

Papa a la grosse tête
Papa nous fait marrer
Il explique tout il comprend tout
Il est plus fort que Je sais Tout . . .

Le Père

Silence, enfants . . . Votre père a fait trois fois le tour du monde des idées. Je vous intime l'ordre de vous taire et de l'écouter.

Les Enfants

Si on ne peut plus chanter alors . . .

Le Père

Silence! Vous avez pris en mon absence, le monde à la légère. D'abord, répondez . . . afin que je puisse savoir si vous n'avez pas oublié les premières élémentaires et salutaires leçons de choses. Qu'est-ce que Dieu?

Les Enfants

Dieu est un petit bonhomme sans queue qui fume sa pipe au coin du feu.

Le Père

Oh! (puis conciliant) Vous rappelez-vous, au moins, l'un de vos premiers cantiques, parmi ceux que vous préférez?

Les Enfants

La quéquette à Jésus-Christ n'est pas plus grosse qu'une allumette
Il s'en sert pour faire pipi
Vive la quéquette à Jésus-Christ!

Domination of people is manifested in many forms. Other examples used by Prévert are seen in such poems as "Etranges Étrangers" and "Faste de Versailles 53."

Prévert, Spectacle, p. 58-60.
Le Père

Ah! (il a la fureur violette).

Les Enfants

Mais nous nous rappelons aussi celui-ci:

Le petit Jésus s'en va-t-à l'école
En portant sa croix dessus son épaule
Quand il savait sa leçon
On lui donnait du bonbon
Une pomme douce
Pour mettre à sa bouche
Un bouquet de fleurs
Pour mettre sur son cœur . . .

Refrain

C'est pour vous c'est pour moi
Que Jésus est mort en croix.

Le Père

À la bonne heure!

In this poem the father feels that he possesses absolute truth because wisdom comes with age. The children do not want to be encumbered with absurd philosophical systems. They prefer to remain free of suppressive institutions. By making fun of Christ, the children attempt to destroy the father's illusion. He becomes infuriated because they will not accept his definition of reality. The children finally relent to the subjugating personality of the father, who replies, "la bonne heure."

The children, who represent mankind, do not revolt against an absurd system. Even though there is token resistance, they, as the student in Ionesco's La Leçon, accept definition by others. It is easier to become object than to revolt. The system seems overpowering, and the
controlling ideologies are seemingly indestructable.

The reducing of others to object is also seen in the poem, "L'Accent Grave."25

Le Professeur

Elève Hamlet!

L'Elève Hamlet

... Hein ... Quoi ... Pardon ... Qu'est-ce qui se passe ... Qu'est-ce qu'il y a ... Qu'est-ce que c'est? ...

Le Professeur

Vous ne pouvez pas répondre "présent" comme tout le monde? Pas possible, vous êtes encore dans les nuages.

L'Elève Hamlet

Être ou ne pas être dans les nuages!

Le Professeur

Suffit. Pas tant de manières. Et conjuguez-moi le verbe être, comme tout le monde, c'est tout ce que je vous demande.

L'Elève Hamlet

To be ...

Le Professeur

En français, s'il vous plaît, comme tout le monde.

L'Elève Hamlet

Bien, monsieur.
Je suis ou je ne suis pas
Tu es ou tu n'es pas
Il est ou il n'est pas
Nous sommes ou nous ne sommes pas ... 

25 Prévert, Paroles, p. 56-57.
Le Professeur

Mais c'est vous qui n'y êtes pas, mon pauvre ami!

L'Elève Hamlet

C'est exact, monsieur le professeur,
Je suis "ôù" je ne suis pas
Et, dans le fond, hein, à la reflexion,
Être "ôù" ne pas être
C'est peut-être aussi la question.

The professor will tolerate no initiative on the part of the student. He must accept dominance or suffer the consequences. The professor wants the student to conjugate the verb "être" like everyone else. This indicates that he wants to depersonalize the student, and through such means he will be able to gain control over him.

The student still tries to retain his individuality when he says, "To be ..." The attitude of the student is intolerable to the professor. Passivity is a necessary ingredient for domination. At the end of the poem, through the use of a play on words, "ou, où," the student sums up the human condition. Man is a part of his space-time continuum. He is trapped in an absurd condition and must continually revolt against it.

Domination of others does not necessarily have to be on a personal level. In the poem, "La Grasse Matinée,"26 the whole structure of society is seen as repressive.

Il est terrible
le petit bruit de l'œuf dur cassé sur un comptoir d'étain
il est terrible ce bruit

26Prévert, Paroles, p. 79-81.
quand il remue dans la mémoire de l'homme qui a faim
elle est terrible aussi la tête de l'homme quand il se regarde à six heures du matin dans la glace du grand magasin une tête couleur de poussière ce n'est pas sa tête pourtant qu'il regarde dans la vitrine de chez Potin il s'en fout de sa tête l'homme il n'y pense pas il songe il imagine une autre tête une tête de veau par exemple avec une sauce de vinaigre ou une tête de n'importe quoi qui se mange et il remue doucement la mâchoire doucement et il grince des dents doucement car le monde se paye sa tête et il ne peut rien contre ce monde et il compte sur ses doigts un deux trois un deux trois cela fait trois jours qu'il n'a pas mangé et il a beau se répéter depuis trois jours ça ne peut pas durer ça dure trois jours trois nuits sans manger et derrière ces vitres ces pâtés ces bouteilles ces conserves poissons morts protégés par les boites boites protégées par les vitres vitres protégées par les flics flics protégés par la crainte que de barricades pour six malheureuses sardines ... Un peu plus loin le bistro café-crème et croissants chauds l'homme titube et dans l'intérieur de sa tête un brouillard de mots un brouillard de mots sardines à manger oeuf dur café-crème café arrosé rhum café-crème café-crème café-crème arrosé sang! ... Un homme très estimé dans son quartier a été égorgé en plein jour
l'assassin le vagabond lui a volé
deuX francs
soit un café arrosé
zéro franc soixante-dix
deux tartines beurrées
et vingt-cinq centimes pour le pourboire du
garçon.

Il est terrible
le petit bruit de l'oeuf dur cassé sur un
comptoir d'étain
il est terrible ce bruit
quand il remue dans la mémoire de l'homme
qui a faim.

In this poem, it is not a particular person, but rather
a system that reduces the individual to object. He has no
identity, and is forced to react in a violent manner with
a meaningless gesture that will do nothing to change his
condition. His violent reaction to his subjugated position
in society emphasizes even more his dehumanization. The
attempt at self-assertion can lead only to self-destruction.
His act is a futile attempt to alleviate a hopeless situ­a­tion. The poem ends on a tearful note, "il est terrible ce
bruit." Revolt seems useless, and despair in face of the
absurd is man's plight.

It can thus be seen that Prévert exhibits many of the
characteristics that are portrayed in much of modern litera­ture. Man is seen as alienated from others, subjugated by
ruthless institutions, unable to change his situation.
Rather than revolt against his absurd condition, he accepts
the role of object, and through habit, performs meaningless
gestures as he awaits death.

But Prévert does not come to a passive negative con-
elusion. In a later chapter, it will be seen that he offers a solution to the absurd, that of a positive revolt.
CHAPTER THREE

SOLUTIONS TO THE ABSURD

In the two previous chapters, it was seen that confrontation with the absurd resulted in attitudes that did not lead to positive revolt. The protagonists who were examined were, in varying degrees, cognizant of man's absurd condition, but refused to go a step further by revolting in the name of mankind.

The idea of destiny in La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu replaced individual responsibility. In Antigone, the infection of the desire for absolutes led to despair and death. Garine, in Les Conquérants revolted, but it was a gratuitous act.

The feeling of the absurd led Roquetin to a preference for romantic solitude instead of revolt against man's condition. Mersault accepted the banal everyday existence, never affirming the importance of life until the end. The absurd reached its logical conclusion with Caligula; that of the death wish, a negation of life.

Hopelessness and despair reached its grimest peak with Beckett and Ionesco. Depersonalized man was seen waiting without objection for a meaningless death.

These same traits were also exhibited in Prévert. He
presented depersonalized man without hope in an oppressive absurd universe.

If man is trapped in an absurd condition, can he find a solution to his predicament? Is revolt possible against the absurdity of his existence?

The possibility of positive revolt and action will be examined in this chapter in the writers of Sartre, Camus and Ionesco.

In Sartre's play Les Mouches, the concept of individual liberty is contrasted with the lack of revolt of a Roquetin. Oreste becomes authentic through action. As Jacques L. Salvan notes:

Starting from the quest of being, Sartre ends with a philosophy of action, and sees no effective realization of liberty except in commitment. Through commitment, man will henceforward know that he is always able to define his essence and, to that extent, master his destiny.¹

Commitment becomes important for Oreste. He knows that he is free, committed to choose. He tells Electre:

Je suis libre Electre; la liberté a fondu sur moi comme la foudre.²

Oreste has experienced a "prise de conscience," and he realizes he will no longer be able to escape the responsibility for this act. He explains this to Electre:

J'ai fait mon acte, Electre, et cet acte était


bon. Je le porterai sur mes épaules comme un passeur d'eau porte les voyageurs, je le ferais passer sur l'autre rive et j'en rendrai compte. Et plus il sera lourd à porter, plus je me réjouirai, car ma liberté, c'est lui. Hier encore, je marchais au hasard sur la terre, et des milliers de chemins fuyaient sous mes pas, car ils appartenaient à d'autres. Je les ai tous empruntés, celui des haleurs, qui court au long de la rivière, et le sentier du muletier et la route pavée des conducteurs de chars; mais aucun n'était à moi. Aujourd'hui, il n'y en a plus qu'un et Dieu sait où il mène: mais c'est mon chemin. 3

He has chosen his road and will continue to march along, never deviating. He accepts complete responsibility for his act. There was no enjoyment in his act, but it was a necessity. The murder has separated him from the masses, and he is alone, bearing the brunt of his act, which was individual and not collective.

His engagement is exclusively personal. He is the intellectual who must act, even though the masses, for whom he is acting, fail to achieve their liberty through his act.

Oreste has broken with the past. His act has severed all previous ties. He explains this to Jupiter:

... je voyais ma jeunesse pour la dernière fois. Mais, tout à coup, la liberté a fondu sur moi et m'a transi, la nature a sauté en arrière, et je n'ai plus eu d'âge, et je me suis senti tout seul, au milieu de ton petit monde béni, comme quelqu'un qui a perdu son ombre; et il n'y a plus rien eu au ciel, ni Bien ni Mal, ni personne pour me donner des ordres. 4

He is alone with no one to aid him in his decisions.

3Ibid., p. 163.
4Ibid., p. 182.
He is lucid enough to realize that he is without exterior values, completely dependent upon himself.

When Oreste later tells Jupiter,

Etrangère moi-même, je sais. Hors nature, contre nature, sans excuse, sans autre recours qu'en moi. Mais je ne reviendrai pas sous ta loi; je suis condamné à n'avoir d'autre loi que la mienne. Je ne reviendrai pas à ta nature: mille chemins y sont tracés qui conduisent vers toi, mais je ne peux suivre que mon chemin. Car je suis un homme, Jupiter, et chaque homme doit inventer son chemin.5

It is as Glicksberg points out:

We see how Oreste, when he gets rid of the vastly reassuring but cowardly illusion (an example of "bad faith") that he is under the special protection of the gods, experiences an exhilarating sense of freedom. He has arrived at the frightening but liberating discovery that the gods are completely powerless against those in whose heart the light of freedom shines.6

Oreste alone gives signification, and he accepts this responsibility. He rejects a priori values and God because he is his own foundation of values. He is committed to act, never knowing if his act will be justified, never knowing if he will feel the wrath of the people. His is a personal revolt against man's absurd condition, and even if not understood by the masses, it is a positive revolt in the name of mankind.

As Rima Drell Reck points out:

5Ibid.

Aware that action is necessary to bring about the changes he feels must take place, Sartre is too lucid to ignore the fact that active means are by definition impure and that the ends will be colored by the means employed. Thus, Oreste knows that people are unable to comprehend his act, and that he will never know if the ends justify the means. But, he will accept the consequences of his act, a positive revolt against man's absurd condition.

Revolt in the name of mankind is also seen in some of Camus' works. In the play Les Justes, the problem of ends justifying means is examined. The poet hero Kaliayev is a member of a group participating in the Russian Revolution.

He loves life and recognizes human values. For him, revolt cannot be gratuitous, but must give solutions to problems. As Nathan A. Scott says, "the preoccupation with the morality of rebellion is at the heart of Les Justes." For Kaliayev, there are limits to revolt. He negates the nihilistic approach to man's condition. He acts for the present and not for some justification in the future.

When he does not throw the bomb the first time because of the children in the carriage, he and Stephan argue. In answer to Stephan's statement that we are murderers and have chosen to be, Kaliayev answers:

Non. J'ai choisi de mourir pour que le meurtre ne triomphe pas. J'ai choisi d'être


innocent.9

For Kaliayev, innocence is of the utmost importance. Revolt is not something to be taken lightly, but rather it requires a feeling of responsibility. This is the difficulty of being a human being.

After the assassination, he is imprisoned where he comes face to face with the "Grande-Duchesse." He has to refuse her grace in order to retain his innocence. He must remain "juste". He tells her:

Laissez-moi me préparer à mourir. Si je ne mourrais pas, c'est alors que je serais un meurtrier.10

This attitude is explained by Philip Tody.

Kaliayev's solution to the problem of revolt, and the one which Camus recognizes as the only valid one, is that the assassin should pay with his life for the life he has taken. He will thus show, by his two actions, that murder is both inevitable and impossible, and will illustrate the impossible tension between the yes and the no of revolt.11

The problem of the required responsibility for an act is solved by Kaliayev. If one must kill, then one has to offer his life. He feels responsibility for people of today, not for some future ideal. To die is the only justification for killing, and by accepting his own death, he is protesting against death itself. He is alone in the face

---

10Ibid., p. 145.
of the absurd, and by his act, affirms the importance of life.

Ionesco is considered by some critics to paint man in an absurd condition, and then walk away with a negative attitude. But, the Ionesco of *La Cantatrice Chauve* and *La Leçon* in which empty dehumanized individuals are shown playing the role of object, offers a positive revolt against man's absurd condition in the plays *Rhinocéros*, *Tueur sans gages*, and *Le Pieton de l'Air*. In these plays, the protagonist, Béranger refuses to become object by revolting against the absurd condition.

In the play *Rhinocéros*, conformity is rendered visible through the use of the rhinoceros, a symbol of degradation. The rhinoceros is an insensitive bully who does not care for the feelings of others. The people who become rhinocéroses are those who do not revolt against the absurd, but rather accept and live as object. They do not act authentically.

In this play, Béranger is the only authentic existent who is surrounded by inauthenticity. Early in the play, he expresses his feeling of being human when he acknowledges his mortality:

> Je suis fatigué, depuis des années fatigué. J'ai du mal à porter le poids de mon propre corps.

Béranger does not live under the illusion that there

---

is anything waiting for him but death. He suffers the agony of isolation. He is not the confident hero who knows exactly what he will do. He fears rhinocerosity, and the thought of capitulation occurs to him:

Justement, j'ai peur de la contagion.¹³

Intellectual attempts to explain man's absurd condition are useless pomposity, as it cannot be explained. Béranger senses this when he tells Dudard:

Mais je sens, moi, que vous êtes dans votre tort... je le sens instinctivement, ou plutôt non, c'est le rhinocéros qui a de l'instinct, je le sens intuitivement, voilà le mot, intuitivement.¹⁴

Béranger has no intellectual aid to guide his choice. He must feel that he is human, and he must follow that feeling.

In the last scene of the play, Daisy goes to join the Rhinoceroses, leaving Béranger alone. He will not follow her:

Vous ne m'aurez pas. Je ne vous suivrai pas, je ne vous comprend pas! Je reste ce que je suis. Je suis un être humain.¹⁵

He fluctuates as he continues to fight the desire to join the herd. This would be the easiest thing to do; but he remains authentic and the play ends:

Je suis le dernier homme, je le resterai

¹³Ibid., p. 84.
¹⁴Ibid., p. 95.
¹⁵Ibid., p. 115.
jusqu'au bout! Je ne capitule pas.16

Béranger has chosen to be human. He cries out in the name of mankind as his agonizing choice to be authentic weighs heavily upon him.

In the play, Le Piéton de l'Air, the flying of Béranger astonishes everyone. Man desires to know everything as he is unwilling to accept an irrational existence. When he is asked how he did it, Béranger shows that he is aware of the absurd when he answers:

Je vous assure, je le fait tout spontanément.
Ça vient tout :-seul.17

Béranger is saying that there are no reasons for being. Man is an accident and his life is gratuitous. The need for self-assertion is the need for authenticity. As Béranger says:

Voler est un besoin indispensable à l'homme.18

Under continued interrogation by those who need a rational explanation as to why he flew, Béranger answers:

Je ne sais pas . . . Je n'ai pas pu faire autrement.19

There is no explanation. All rational arguments that pretend to explain man's existence are superfluous. One has to feel in order to live.

16Ibid., p. 117.
17Ibid., p. 165.
18Ibid., p. 166.
19Ibid., p. 192.
When asked about what he saw while flying, Béranger
replies:

J’ai vu des milliers des gens que l’on fouettait
et qui disaient: Bien fait pour nous, bien fait
pour nous . . .20

Béranger attempts to explain to the masses that they
are like the rhinoceroses because they are inauthentic.
They are insensitive to others, and will never be able to
fly because they will never escape their role of object by
becoming human.

It can thus be seen that in order to revolt against
the absurd, one must feel that one is human and must act
authentically in the name of mankind. In the following
chapter, the poetry of Prévert will be examined in order to
see the solution that he offers to man’s absurd condition.

20Ibid., p. 195.
CHAPTER FOUR

PRÉVERT'S SOLUTION TO THE ABSURD

In the earlier chapter on Prévert, the absurd assumed the physical form of oppressive institutions which reduce the individual to object. These particular individuals were portrayed as those who did not transcend their condition through a positive act, but rather accepted the systems that bound them to the role of the exploited. Prévert also painted individuals whose encounter with the absurd was on a metaphysical level. It was seen as existential anguish, the result of the realization of man's finitude.

The problem for Prévert is one of presenting a solution to both the physical manifestations of the absurd and its metaphysical counterpart of anguish. Confronted by oppressive institutions, man has the choice of either succumbing to the definition of others, or declaring his individuality by refusing to participate in the system that reduces him to object.

For Prévert, the individual must assert himself by refusing to accept definition from others. He must reject the ideas imposed upon him that are not of his own choosing, whether they be those of society or those of a philosophical system that purports to have explained the human condition. He must be responsible unto himself by exerting his own
individuality, placing importance on what he feels, what he knows, and what he feels he is, even if this entails a revolt against the definitions and standards that are embraced by the majority. He must affirm the importance of the individual, and it must be an affirmation of life.

The finitude of man is an accepted reality, and because of the presence of death, life becomes even more important. Thus, because it is of such importance, the things that are considered unimportant by society, such as birds, trees and flowers, take on a new dimension in Prévert. They are the things that exist naturally in nature, and should be accepted for what they are without interpretive evaluations. They are, as love, to be accepted as natural phenomena without recourse as to why they exist.

The concept of love as a binding institution should be discarded in favor of a love that emphasizes the naturalness of sensuality, but which at the same time does not reduce the other to object. It is a direct experience that is not based on an abstraction, such as Christian love which can be manipulated to suit the situation. The love of self emanates from the individual and he is able to love others. He and the others are a part of nature, and the love of nature is the realization that man is an integral part of nature.

Prévert's emphasis is upon man's ability to intuit reality rather than his use of reason to explain the beauty of life. Love, beauty, and nature are inexplicable, and
therefore must be approached intuitively. They are not subject to empirical analysis and cannot be reduced to abstractions in which reason plays a dominant role. This approach to reality leads Prévert to rely upon the imagination of man through which he transcends his absurd condition and by which he transforms his reality.

The revolt that is present in Prévert leads to a positive affirmation of life, and a call upon man to use his intuitive approach to reality, by means of which he can transcend the oppressiveness of existence and find a newer reality that he himself creates.

This does not mean that Prévert represents a flight from reality into art because his art is functional. It is inescapably intertwined with a philosophy of life; that is, of a life that is to be felt and loved, and that is within this environment. The imagination functions as a useful tool of liberation. The first step in the direction of Prévert's vision of liberation is based on individual revolt.

The revolt that is seen against the social order is reflected in Prévert's revolt against traditional rules of art. His insistence upon individual feeling in life is reflected in his art through the use of an intuitive approach, the product of imagination. In the reality of everyday living, the advocacy of feeling for others, and the use of one's imagination are reflected in Prévert's aesthetics. His approach to art is an approach to life.
The individual is free from a preconceived image of himself and can thus act in a creative manner. In the realm of aesthetics, Prévert frees himself from the bonds of tradition that insist upon punctuated form. The free flow of expression takes precedence over the strictures of formality. The creative act cannot function within preconceived boundaries, because the act of experiencing must be free from preconceived notions. The artistic endeavor is itself an experience, and the spontaneity of the act ceases to exist when bound by pre-set rules or values.

Thus, the approach to reality does not hinge on systems that more often than not suppress the individual, but rather Prévert implores the individual to revolt against these systems and seek reality within oneself.

The empty illusions offered by logical systems are rejected by the dromedary in the poem, "Le Dromadaire Mécontent."¹ He rejects the formality of logic that governs the social order.² At the beginning of the poem, the young dromedary is not happy. The reason for his unhappiness results from the fact that he has gone to hear a "conférence." The use of the term "conférence" implies enlightenment, and the dromedary was so excited that he "n'avait pas dormi de la nuit tellement il était impatient."

¹Prévert, Histoires et d'autres histoires, p. 156-157.
²This same rejection of formal logic can also be seen in a poem such as "En sortant de l'école."
But, at this great event that he had so eagerly awaited, "la conférence n'était pas du tout ce qu'il avait imaginé." He had anticipated lively things, such as music. He wanted something that intensified the feeling for life, and not something serious that presented no true answers. He was deceived because all that occurred was, "Depuis une heure trois quarts un gros monsieur parlait."

The "gros monsieur" continued with this serious discussion of "dromadaires et des chameaux," and the young dromedary "avait de plus en plus envie de pleurer, de s'en aller..." The young dromedary is similar to many of Prévert's characters who flee verbal tyranny. He recognizes that the others are being dominated by the use of rhetoric. The superiority of the "conférencier" is rejected by the young dromedary.

Toutes les cinq minutes, le conférencier répétait: "Il ne faut surtout pas confondre les dromadaires avec les chameaux, j'attire, mesdames, messieurs et chers dromadaires, votre attention sur ce fait: le chameau a deux bosses, mais le dromadaire n'en a qu'une!"

The observation is a known fact and should merit no attention whatsoever; but the audience was very impressed, and "les chameaux, les dromadaires, les hommes, les femmes et les enfants prenaient des notes sur leur petit calepin."

The "conférencier", after having stated the above truth, reversed his rhetoric and repeated the same thing.

"Ce qui différencie les deux animaux, c'est que le dromadaire n'a qu'une bosse, tandis que, chose étrange et utile à savoir, le chameau en a deux."
This twist of logic is Prévert's way of ridiculing the creators of philosophical systems that attempt to explain the human condition. The system of rhetoric stifles the young dromedary and he revolts.

A la fin, le jeune dromadaire en eut assez et se précipitant sur l'estrade, il mordit le conférencier.

His action enraged the audience and they called him a "sale chameau." But, the end of the poem states:

Pourant c'était un dromadaire, et il était très propre.

The audience is out of touch with reality. They are the masses who need the labels imposed by the "conférencier." They cannot function without labels. The revolt of the dromedary is Prévert's condemnation of factual knowledge. The masses depend on facts because they cannot support the void of the non-factual that requires self-assertion. It is easier to accept intellectual bondage than to experience reality oneself. Prévert condemns this attitude because if knowledge is to be meaningful to man, it has to be experien-
tial.

The poem is an affirmation of the importance of man. The individual act is necessary, even if others do not under-
stand. Prévert espouses the idea that man does not need absurd philosophical systems in order to function as an authentic individual.

Prévert also negates the value of religious systems.  

3The same idea is expressed in "La Nouvelle saison."
In the poem, "Pater Noster," the use of a plea to God to allow man to choose his own destiny is a challenge to all metaphysical systems.

Notre Père qui êtes aux cieux
Restez-y
Et nous nous resterons sur la terre
Qui est quelquefois si jolie
Avec ses mystères de New York
Et puis ses mystères de Paris
Qui valent bien celui de la Trinité
Avec son petit canal de l'Ourocq
Sa grande muraille de Chine
Sa rivièr e de Morlaix
Ses bêtises de Cambrai
Avec son océan Pacifique
Et ses deux bassins aux Tuileries
Avec ses bons enfants et ses mauvais sujets
Avec toutes les merveilles du monde
Qui sont là
Simplement sur la terre
Offertes à tout le monde
Eparpillées

The poet's use of the words "mystères" indicates that life is more exciting without metaphysical explanations of the human condition. Man needs to free himself from the "mystères" of religion because he must be free to experience the "mystères" of nature. Even though there is injustice in the world, man does not need an absolute system that may in itself become more unjust. Life has to be accepted as being of this world. To be authentic, one cannot pin his hopes on a metaphysical system that is beyond human comprehension. This statement on the human condition is Prévert's acceptance of the relative nature of the universe. Man must refuse the leap toward an absolute and accept the world of

contradiction. Metaphysical systems offer false hopes, and the reliance upon an absolute invariably results in servitude. Man is the creator of his values, and he must revolt against the imposition of absolute systems.

Self-assertion in the name of individual values is seen in the poem, "Le Balayeur." At the beginning of the poem, we see the individual who is chained to a position of involuntary servitude. He mechanically passes the days at his task. Even though he has not yet revolted, he possesses a feeling for life.

il regarde le soleil
il est amoureux

Daydreaming is considered by the system to be a non-productive act. The sweeper daydreams, and he feels a sensation of pleasure. Productivity and the negation of pleasure are a part of the traditional Christian ethic and the capitalist system. The sweeper's approach to reality is in opposition to this ethic. He poses a threat.

Apparaît alors
l'Ange gardien du balayeur
qui d'un très simple geste
lui fait honte de sa paresse
et lui conseille de reprendre le labeur

The angel disappears and the sweeper takes up his broom again to continue his task. He is ashamed because he has questioned the system, and he automatically assumes the

5 Self-assertion is also displayed in other poems such as "Quartier libre" and "Le Salon."

6 Prévert, Spectacle, p. 41-44.
guilt of someone who has dared to revolt against his predetermined essence. He resumes his role of object by meekly accepting his definition of sweeper.

A beautiful woman comes and the sweeper attempts to touch her. It is a futile gesture.

La femme s'en va sans le voir
Il reste seul avec son balai
et soudain constate
que l'Ange est revenu
et l'a vu
et le blâme
d'un regard douloureux
et d'un geste de plus en plus affectueux
et de plus en plus menaçant

The sweeper has again been relegated to an inferior position. The beautiful things in life are denied to him, and the system of repression is reinforced by the institution of God. The sweeper accepts his place in the order of things.

The understanding that he has a particular niche in the structure of the universe is further reinforced when:

L'Ange une nouvelle fois
fait comprendre au balayeur
qu'il est là pour balayer
puis disparaît

The sweeper once again picks up his broom and continues his work. Suddenly, cries are heard coming from the river, and the Angel reappears and makes the sweeper save a girl who is drowning.

C'est une fille très belle
et dévêvue

The sweeper then,

la couche sur un banc
avec une infinie délicatesse
et la soigne
la ranime
la caresse

The Angel has made him save the woman, but the result is unexpected. The sweeper has allowed himself the pleasure of sensations and human feelings. He has rejected the abstract Christian concept of love that is a denial of sensuality. The Christian ethic of love is exposed as a hypocrisy when:

L'Ange intervient
et donne au balayeur
le conseil de rejeter dans le fleuve
celette "diablesse"
La "diablesse" qui reprend goût à la vie
grâce aux caresses du balayeur
se lève
et sourit

The sweeper and the girl show signs of happiness as they dance. The Angel becomes angry and threatens them with "des foudres du ciel," but:

Ils éclatent de rire
s'embrassent
et s'en vont en dansant

The sweeper has finally revolted against values that have been created by others. Laughter, as is frequently the case in Prévert, is a form of revolt. The laughter in this poem mocks the values that are considered ludicrous by the poet. The sweeper acts authentically by rejecting the notion that his life was created for the sole purpose of sweeping. He affirms the positive values that he has always possessed: love and pleasure that are not related to any dogma, but are rather the natural feelings of mankind. The
feelings that he experiences are more valid than any possible future beyond death. He affirms the importance of man and the importance of the moment.

In the last stanza of the poem, the Angel has taken on the role of sweeper.

L'Ange gardien essuie une larme
ramasse le balai
et balaye . . . balaye . . . balaye . . . balaye . . .
in - exo - ra - ble - ment.

The reduction of the Angel to this position indicates that the revolt of the sweeper is positive. He affirms the value and dignity of all men by rejecting a priori values in the name of the present. He is existentially choosing for the moment and for the individual.

The importance of the individual is also seen in the poem, "Quelqu'un."?

Un homme sort de chez lui
C'est tres tôt le matin
C'est un homme qui est triste
Cela se voit à sa figure
Soudain dans une boîte à ordures
Il voit un vieux Bottin Mondain
Quand on est triste on passe le temps
Et l'homme prend le Bottin
Le secoue un peu et le feuillette machinalement
Les choses sont comme elles sont
Cet homme si triste est triste parce qu'il s'appelle
Ducon
Et il feuillette
Et continue à feuilleter
Et il s'arrête
A la page des D
Et il regarde a la colonne des D-U du . . .
Et son regard d'homme triste devient plus gai plus
clair
Personne

Vraiment personne ne porte le même nom
Je suis le seul Ducon
Dit-il entre ses dents
Et il jette le livre s'époussette les mains
Et poursuit fièrement son petit bonhomme de chemin

In the machine age, the individual discovers that he is just a number that is easily forgotten. Man feels that he is lost in the mass. If there are several people named Smith, the individual is no longer a real Smith, but a part of Smithness, a non-entity. The wholeness of Smith swallows up the parts of Smith, rendering the individual object, a fragment of the abstract whole. He is a part of the machine, playing a role that keeps the whole functioning.

But, the person in the poem finds a directory and discovers that he is the only Ducon. The discovery emphasizes the importance of the individual. He is unique, the only one. Even though there may be those who resemble him, he is a unique personality. He thinks, and more importantly, he feels that he is he. There is no other exactly like him. He has no need of a philosophical explanation on which to base his affirmation. He proudly continues his way, affirming his uniqueness in the face of a depersonalized world. He is the creator of his own values and the judge of his acts. The discovery of one's individuality is a positive revolt against the absurd.

The revolt exhibited in these poems is an affirmation of the individual in the face of oppressive forces that attempt to fragment and dehumanize the individual. By affirming his uniqueness, the individual can say yes to life;
and a feeling for life in turn leads to love which implies consideration for others. Thus, the uniqueness of the other is affirmed.

The treatment of love by Prévert is multi-dimensional. There is the physical aspect of love\(^8\) in which emphasis is placed upon the sensual, there is the love of mankind and a general love for nature and all of life.

In the poem, "Vous allez voir ce que vous allez voir,"\(^9\) Prévert asks us to decide between what we know gives us pleasure and what is indefinite and perhaps does not even exist.

Une fille nue nage dans la mer
Un homme barbu marche sur l'eau
Où est la merveille des merveilles
Le miracle annoncé plus haut?

The image of a nude girl swimming in water is in harmony with nature, whereas a bearded man walking on water violates the laws of nature with which man is familiar. The true miracle for Prévert is that of accepting what is natural for man, and not the belief in a supernatural that negates the laws of nature. Prévert's refusal to give importance to the "miracle" of walking on water is evident by his refusal to use the name Jesus or Christ, preferring instead to write "homme barbu," and not in capital letters. He places no importance on such an event because it is

---

\(^8\)The importance of the physical nature is also seen in such poems as "Le Cheval rouge," "A quoi rêvais-tu," "Le grand homme et l'ange gardien," and "Embrasse-moi."

\(^9\)Prévert, Paroles, p. 175.
outside of human experience, and thus is totally irrelevant. His realm of experience is the pleasure of the nude girl, a much greater "miracle," because it is within the domain of human experience.

The simplicity of physical pleasure is revealed in the poem, "Alicante." ¹⁰

Une orange sur la table
Ta robe sur le tapis
Et toi dans mon lit
Doux présent du présent
Fraîcheur de la nuit
Chaleur de ma vie.

The poem emphasizes the importance of the physical in life. As opposed to the belief in a bearded man walking on water, the poem is an affirmation of life without cumbersome beliefs and systems.

The idea of simplicity is reinforced by simple everyday images and a shortness in the length of the poem. This implies that a complicated formula to justify the situation is unneeded. There is also no need of the institution of marriage as the physical aspects without complications are implicit in the poem.

The poet's choice between the nude girl and the bearded man walking on water is further reinforced in a poem entitled "Sanguine," ¹¹ in which Prévert emphasizes the joy of the physical.

La fermeture éclair a glissé sur tes reins

¹⁰ Prévert, Paroles, p. 2₄.
¹¹ Prévert, Spectacle, p. 1₅₁.
et tout l'orage heureux de ton corps amoureux
au beau milieu de l'ombre
a éclaté soudain
Et ta robe en tombant sur le parquet ciré
n'a pas fait plus de bruit
qu'une écorce d'orange tombant sur un tapis
Mais sous nos pieds
ses petits boutons de nacre craquaient comme des pépins
Sanguine
joli fruit
la point de ton sein
a tracé une nouvelle ligne de chance
dans le creux de ma main
Sanguine
joli fruit
Soleil de nuit.

The quiet atmosphere of the poem is indicative of an
intuitive understanding that exists between the participants.
There is no dialogue because a mutual inexplicable feeling
exists between the partners.

There is no indication that Prévert condones promis-
cuity. In fact, the atmosphere created in the two poems,
"Alicante" and "Sanguine" indicates a spiritual feeling be-
tween the people involved. The similar images in both
poems, such as the orange, the dress falling to the floor,
"Chaleur de ma vie" and "soleil de nuit" indicate the im-
portance of the spontaneous act that is untempered by the
intellect. But, it is not an act of exploitation by either
party. For Prévert, people are not to be treated as object
under the guise of love. This is clearly shown in the poem,
"Pour toi mon amour."12

Je suis allé au marché aux oiseaux
Et j'ai acheté des oiseaux

12 Prévert, Paroles, p. 41.
Pour toi
mon amour
Je suis allé au marché aux fleurs
Et j'ai acheté des fleurs
Pour toi
mon amour

Je suis allé au marché à la ferraille
Et j'ai acheté des chaînes
De lourdes chaînes
Pour toi
mon amour

Et puis je suis allé au marché aux esclaves
Et je t'ai cherchée
Mais je ne t'ai pas trouvée
mon amour.

Prévert's use of the verb "acheter" is synonymous with possession. The use of the term "chaînes" implies the physical and psychological domination of another. The poet buys flowers and birds for the loved one he hopes to possess, but soon learns that the desire to possess makes love impossible. The concluding lines of the poem are a denunciation of the desire of possession.

The love which Prévert praises is not a love that enslaves another individual. An individual must retain a free identity, and a love that reduces others to object is a negative value. Prévert negates the right of someone to enslave another under the pretense of love, because love must function as mutual respect and understanding between both parties. Their love must transcend traditional values, such as religious ethics that insist upon the woman being subservient to the man.

The love of which Prévert speaks is seen in the poem,
"Les Enfants qui s'aient." It is a love that is unencumbered by institutions and dogma that render individuals inauthentic.

Les enfants qui s'aient s'embrassent debout
Contre les portes de la nuit
Et les passants qui passent les désignent du doigt
Mais les enfants qui s'aient
Ne sont là pour personne
Et c'est seulement leur ombre
Qui tremble dans la nuit
Excitant la rage des passants
Leur rage leur mépris leurs rires et leur envie
Les enfants qui s'aient ne sont là pour personne
Ils sont ailleurs bien plus loin que la nuit
Bien plus haut que le jour
Dans l'éblouissante clarté de leur premier amour.

The poet's choice of "enfants" to illustrate his point emphasizes the simplicity of love and feelings. The "enfants" are for themselves. They reject any definition that others may attempt to impose upon them. They retain their individuality because they do not suffer from the social stigmas that render the "passants" into objects. In this poem, Prévert contrasts the love that is free with the others who act as a group, accepting the standards of the group. The "enfants" are the poet's ideal because they are free individuals who accept the beauty of their feelings and freely express them.

The acceptance of one's feelings as a guide to human behavior is advocated by Prévert. The implication is that the emotive forces of man are more valid than an intellectually established pattern created to guide one's behavior.

13 Prévert, Spectacle, p. 163.
But, as seen in the poem, "Pour toi mon amour," this does not give license to dominate or exploit others.

The acceptance of what one feels is expressed in the poem, "Je suis comme je suis."\(^{14}\)

\[
\text{Je suis comme je suis} \\
\text{Je suis faite comme ça} \\
\text{Quand j'ai envie de rire} \\
\text{Oui je ris aux éclats} \\
\text{J'aime celui qui m'aime} \\
\text{Est-ce ma faute à moi} \\
\text{Si ce n'est pas le même} \\
\text{Que j'aime chaque fois} \\
\text{Je suis comme je suis} \\
\text{Je suis faite comme ça} \\
\text{Que voulez-vous de plus} \\
\text{Que voulez-vous de moi}
\]

\[
\text{Je suis faite pour plaire} \\
\text{Et n'y puis rien changer} \\
\text{Mes talons sont trop hauts} \\
\text{Ma taille trop cambrée} \\
\text{Mes seins beaucoup trop durs} \\
\text{Et mes yeux trop cernés} \\
\text{Et puis après} \\
\text{Qu'est-ce que ça peut vous faire} \\
\text{Je suis comme je suis} \\
\text{Je plais à qui je plais}
\]

\[
\text{Qu'est-ce que ça peut vous faire} \\
\text{Ce qui m'est arrivé} \\
\text{Oui j'ai aimé quelqu'un} \\
\text{Ou quelqu'un m'a aimée} \\
\text{Comme les enfants qui s'aiment} \\
\text{Simplement savent aimer} \\
\text{Aimer aimer . . .} \\
\text{Pourquoi me questionner} \\
\text{Je suis là pour vous plaire} \\
\text{Et n'y puis rien changer.}
\]

The essence of being consists of the attributes that constitute the individual's feelings toward himself, others and his environment. One feels what he is and should thus follow the inclination of his intuitive knowledge of reality.

\(^{14}\)Prévert, Paroles, p. 96-97.
When one has "envie de rire," one should laugh. This is a normal unexplained function of man that requires no analysis. If a person is inclined toward different loves and in different ways, then this constitutes one's normalcy. The woman in the poem is not condemned by Prévert for her particular behavioral pattern. She does not accept her image from others. She is like "les enfants qui s'aiment" because she rejects any sort of pre-fixed formula of behavior.

Prévert is showing that the constitution of an individual lies in what he feels that he is. He participates in love as he desires and asks for nothing more. He refuses definition from others, basing his behavior on the validity of his feelings. The emphasis is on relative values, and it is up to each individual to decide his manner of behavior.

The aspect of love that has so far been treated in Prévert has been of a physical nature with emphasis on individual feelings. But, in the poem, "Cet Amour," Prévert speaks of a different kind of love, the love of mankind.

The love about which he speaks is not fixed in its expressions or manifestations.

Cet amour
Si violent
Si fragile
Si tendre
Si désespéré
Cet amour
Beau comme le jour

Et mauvais comme le temps  
Quand le temps est mauvais

It takes a concerted effort on the part of everyone to achieve love of mankind because at certain times, circumstances of hate prevail. Man must continue to defeat these moments of inhuman action.

The importance of love is revealed by Prévert in the last part of the poem when he addresses love. He pleads with love to,

Reste là  
 Là où tu es  
 Là où tu étais autrefois  
 Reste là  
 Ne bouge pas  
 Ne t’en va pas

Love is available to all men. It is an uncomplicated feeling that is peculiar to man. Systems of behavior offer no real solution because man is in need of something that comes from his interior being, and not rational creations of conflicting symbols.

Nous n'avions que toi sur la terre  
 Ne nous laisse pas devenir froid  
 Beaucoup plus loin toujours  
 Et n'importe où  
 Donne-nous signe de vie  
 Beaucoup plus tard au coin d'un bois  
 Dans la forêt de la mémoire  
 Surgis soudain  
 Tends-nous la main  
 Et sauve-nous.

Prévert's plea is a plea for all men to recognize the importance of man, that man should be loved because he is man. In what may seem to be a naive gesture, he seems to place the salvation of man in the hands of love. There is
no mention of philosophical systems, nor does he offer guides for human behavior. He simply asks that all men develop a feeling for life, and through a love for mankind, perhaps understanding will be the result.

In order to reinforce this idea of love for fellow man, Prévert shows in the poem, "Chanson du Vitrier,"16 that we are in fact dependent upon each other.

Comme c'est beau
ce qu'on peut voir comme ça
à travers le sable à travers le verre
à travers les carreaux
tenez regardez par exemple
comme c'est beau
ce bûcheron
là-bas au loin
qui abat un arbre
pour faire des planches
pour le menuisier
qui doit faire un grand lit
pour la petite marchande de fleurs
qui va se marier
avec l'allumeur de réverbères
qui allume tous les soirs les lumières
pour que le cordonnier puisse voir clair
en réparant les souliers du cireur
qui brosse ceux du rémouleur
qui affûte les ciseaux du coiffeur
qui coupe le ch'veu au marchand d'oiseaux
qui donne ses oiseaux à tout le monde
pour que tout le monde soit de bonne humeur.

Different people perform different functions in life, and even though it may seem to some that they are alienated from other men, they are in fact dependent upon each other. The interrelationship that exists between all men should create a mutual bond between them, and the cement for this bond should be love, the catalyst for a harmonious whole.

16 Prévert, *Histoires et d'autres histoires*, p. 139-140.
One individual is no more important than any other. Mutual respect and love for all men result from the feeling toward all men of the importance of oneself, and the realization that all others are equally important.

Man must not only respect and love his fellow man, he must also appreciate his position in the scheme of nature. In the poem, "Soyez Polis," man is presented in a total environment.

In the first part of the poem, Prévert admonishes man to,

Soyez polis avec les femmes
Et avec les enfants
Soyez polis
Avec les gars du bâtiment
Soyez polis
Avec le monde vivant

It is not only respect for all men that Prévert insists upon, but also:

Il faut aussi être très poli avec la terre
Et avec le soleil

Man depends upon the stability of his environment, and in speaking of the sun and the earth, Prévert says:

Il ne faut pas les embêter ... les critiquer
Ils savent ce qu'ils ont à faire
Le soleil et la terre
Alors il faut les laisser faire
Ou bien ils sont capables de se fâcher

We must allow nature to function in her own manner without interference from man, because,

Si on s'en mêle on risque d'être changé

---

17 Prévert, Histoires et d'autres histoires, p. 70-73.
If we interfere with nature, we run dire risks that can affect all mankind. We should accept the universe as is, because its means of functioning are not our concern.

Prévert summarizes his point of view in the last part of the poem.

Il faut que tout le monde soit poli avec le monde ou alors il y a des guerres . . . des épidémies des tremblements de terre des paquets de mer des coups de fusil . . . Et de grosses méchantes fourmis rouges qui viennent vous dévorer les pieds pendant qu'on dort la nuit.

Prévert's use of irony in the last three lines of the poem is an indictment of the religious concept of reward and punishment. One's love for his fellow man should not hinge on the expectation of a reward, but rather the reward should be the act of love itself.

Thus, Prévert's view of man in nature corresponds to his idea of love. It is essentially a simplistic approach, an acceptance of that which is natural. Man's intellect supplies no answer to the human condition, just as it cannot explain the natural feelings of man. His idea of the just individual is one who accepts his feelings as valid for himself, and can thus tolerate the feelings of others and the probable conflicts.

The philosophy of Prévert is an intuitive approach to reality, and in the following poems, it will be seen that

18 Man as a part of nature is also seen in such poems as "Le Jardin," "Salut à l'oiseau," "Chanson du mois de mai," and "Les animaux ont des ennuis."
his approach to art corresponds to his approach to life; a philosophy that emphasizes the sensual and negates the intellect. This is not to say that Prévert is anti-rational, but rather that the answer to man's absurd condition lies within his total self; his heart and body as well as his mind. Intellectual games in which men engage deny the true essence of man. This is not nihilistic, but rather an affirmation for feeling that one is human, that the qualities he possesses are also possessed by all others.

In the following poems, it will be seen that the aesthetics of Prévert are related to his approach to reality, and that his solution to the absurd resides in an intuitive artistic approach that all men are capable of feeling. The intuitive artistic approach relies upon the imagination to transform reality into an acceptable solution for the individual. A bird is no longer of a certain genus that is to be dissected anatomically in order to explain its function, but rather it is to be transformed by the imagination to fit the given moment of exhilaration. It is thus through imagination that the intuitive nature of man functions and is able to transcend his absurd condition.

Since Prévert places importance on the intuitive value of man and the capability of his imagination, it is only logical that intellectuals would suffer at his hands. In

---

19A beautiful example of Prévert's anti-intellectualism is seen in the poem, "Les Paris Stupides."
the poem, "Il ne faut pas . . . ," attacks intellectuals.

Il ne faut pas laisser les intellectuels jouer avec les allumettes
Parce que Messieurs quand on le laisse seul Le monde mental Messssieurs
N'est pas du tout brillant Et sitôt qu'il est seul Travaille arbitrairement S'érigéant pour soi-même
Et soi-disant généreusement en l'honneur des travailleurs du bâtiment Un auto-monument Répétons-le Messssssieurs Quand on le laisse seul Le monde mental Ment Monumentalement.

The indictment of the intellectual world is a direct result of Prévert's appeal to the sensual nature of man. The rational part of man inhibits his ability to see with his imaginative intuitiveness. Intellectuals construct systems of knowledge that attempt to classify and categorize the human experience. These rational systems limit man's ability to feel because he is restricted by rules and regulations. He is convinced that he is a type, incapable of creative renewal. He is unaware that for each individual an experience is new and unique. Creative renewal is the act of being human.

One must feel life in order to appreciate the beauty of being human. In the poem, "Au hasard des oiseaux," Prévert tells us it is never too late to experience human

20 Prévert, Paroles, p. 212.
feelings. The man in the poem learned very late about the essential things in life, but now that he has learned, he does not dwell on past regret but participates in the now.

J'ai appris très tard à aimer les oiseaux je le regrette un peu mais maintenant tout est arrangé

He is no longer fixed in his mode of existence. He has changed, and he can warn others of his mistake. The birds represent freedom from rational systems that degrade the spirit of nature. They are the beauty of life, the source of inspiration because:

ils donnent l'exemple
pas l'exemple comme par exemple Monsieur Glacis qui s'est remarquablement courageusement conduit pendant la guerre ou l'exemple du petit Paul qui était si pauvre et si beau et tellement honnête avec ça et qui est devenu plus tard le grand Paul si riche si vieux si honorable et si affreux et si avare et si charitable et si pieux
ou par exemple cette vieille servante qui eut une vie et une mort exemplaires jamais de discussions pas ça l'ongle claquant sur la dent pas ça de discussion avec monsieur ou avec madame au sujet de cette affreuse question des salaires

The contrast made between the birds and people mentioned clearly indicates the poet's preference. The things that most people consider representative of life are bourgeois attitudes and desires. Even the old servant has the same desires. We should discard these negative values and look to the birds who give,

exemple la beauté des oiseaux
exemple le coeur des oiseaux
la lumière des oiseaux.

The birds represent freedom, love and beauty. They do not possess an intellect that creates systems of suppression.
They live according to nature, following their natural inclinations. Man in turn should follow the same example. He should allow his natural feelings to act as his guide.

The rejection of reality created by intellectual systems is vividly portrayed in the poem, "Maintenant j'ai grandi." In this poem, Prévert creates an atmosphere of confusion because at times, the hero in the poem was possessed by "le fou rire" and "puis une tristesse," and at times, "les deux en même temps." This is the human condition. Happiness and sadness are expressions due to certain circumstances. This is normal, and we should react in the manner of the hero of the poem by not succumbing to a rational system that would relieve us from the burden of experience.

Secouer le tête
pour dire non
secouer la tête
pour ne pas laisser entrer les idées des gens

He prefers a different approach to life.

et sourire pour dire oui
oui aux choses et aux êtres
aux êtres et aux choses à regarder à caresser
à aimer ou à laisser

The appeal to the senses is obvious. Those things that bring pleasure to man are the things that are preferable.

The hero of the poem has now become an adult. Under normal circumstances, we rid ourselves of the illusions of childhood and assume bourgeois attitudes. But, the hero in

22 Prévert, La Flûte et le beau temps, p. 59-60.
the poem refuses to compromise.

Maintenant, j'ai grandi
les idées aussi
mais ce sont toujours de grandes idées
de belles idées
d'idéales idées
Et je leur ris toujours au nez
Mais elles m'attendent
pour se venger
et me manger
un jour où je serai très fatigué
Mais moi au coin d'un bois
je les attends aussi
et je leur tranche la gorge
je leur coupe l'appétit.

The imagery in the poem is indicative of a vicious battle. It is quite literally a battle for survival. The poet will resist by all possible means the attempt to dehumanize him. He will retain the feelings of the child, an attitude towards life that requires no rational explanation for the beauty of a bird or the sensation of a caress.23 He will continue to allow his feeling for life to govern his behavior as he remains on guard against the encroachment of rational ideas. The imaginative approach to reality transcends the restrictiveness of intellectual endeavors because the imagination interprets the inherent beauty in nature.

The anti-intellectual approach to reality is also seen in the poem "L'Enfant de mon Vivant,"24 in which Prévert extols the beauty of living as that of tears and laughter, all to be done "naturellement." Man must "vivre comme on

23 This same idea can also be seen in poems such as "Page d'écriture," and "Cadeau d'oiseau."

24 Prévert, La Pluie et le beau temps, p. 235-236.
rêve." These are not intellectual processes, but rather are things that are peculiar to man and are part of his intuitive nature and imagination. The poet rejects inclusion in the ranks of the intellectuals.

Non
je ne serai jamais leur homme
puisque leur homme est un roseau pensant

Man must shun the intellectual solutions that stifle his inherent capability to feel life.

Man's revolt against the intellectual approach to reality, and his reaction to the absurd, should be similar to that of the sweeper in "Parfois le balayeur..." 25

Parfois le balayeur
poursuivant désespérément
son abominable labeur
parmi les poussiéreuses ruines
d'une crapuleuse exposition coloniale
s'arrête émerveillé
devant d'extraordinaires statues
de feuillage et de fleurs
qui représentent à s'y méprendre
des rêves
des crimes des fêtes des lueurs
des femmes nues une rivière l'aurore et le bonheur
et le rire et puis le désir
des oiseaux et des arbres
qu'bon la lune l'amour le soleil et la mort
Étranges monuments de l'instant même
élevés à la moindre des choses
par des indigènes heureux
et malheureux
et laissés là
généreusement offerts au hasard et au vent
ces statues se dressent
devant le balayeur qui n'en croit pas ses yeux
et qui met la main sur son coeur
en se sentant soudain
inexplicablement heureux
Et les statues balancent doucement

25 Prévert, Spectacle, p. 196-197.
dans l'oseille du soleil couchant
leurs jolis corps de filles noires
drapés de pavots rouges et blancs
Et la statue du vent
toute nue derrière les statues d'arbres
fait retentir le bienveillant vacarme
de l'espace et du temps
Et la statue enfant terrifie le gendarme
par la seule grâce de son chant
et la lune bat la campagne
avec son grand fléau d'argent
Et le balayeur sourit
bercé et caressé
par la statue qui représente la fraîcheur de la vie
Et moi quand je regarde les tableaux de Paul Klee
je suis comme ce balayeur
reconnaissant
émerveillé
ravi.

At the beginning of the poem, Prévert paints an atmosphere of destruction and despair as he sets the stage for the sweeper. The artificial monuments that are seen by the sweeper are rejected in favor of the natural things such as birds and trees. These are not the result of some intellectual rationalization, but rather things that are of nature. The sweeper intuitively knows. He does not need intellectual processes to tell him what is beautiful.

The sweeper is in tune with nature because he is capable of experiencing reality intuitively. The policeman is terrified because he is unable to comprehend the naturalness of the situation. As an instrument of the system, he can only function in a logical manner that is in contradiction with the imaginative approach to reality. The sweeper is able to smile because his creative imagination has transformed the moment of despair. The last five lines of the poem show that Prévert equates his approach to
reality with the dream-like imaginative qualities of Klee's paintings. His paintings represent the inexplicable interior of man. It cannot be explained rationally, but this feeling is common to all men, even the lowly sweeper.

This same idea is presented in the poem, "Le Cancre."26

Il dit non avec la tête
mais il dit oui avec le coeur
il dit oui à ce qu'il aime
il dit non au professeur
il est debout
on le questionne
et tous les problèmes sont posés
soudain le fou rire le prend
et il efface tout
les chiffres et les mots
les dates et les mots
les phrases et les pièges
et malgré les menaces du maître
sous les huées des enfants prodiges
avec des craies de toutes les couleurs
sur le tableau noir du malheur
il dessine le visage du bonheur.

The response to the universe must come from the heart, not from the head. Man's rationale creates ambiguities that frequently conflict with each other. Any ontological explanation must be intuitive because there are no answers to the human condition. The student says no to the professor who incarnates the intellectual attitude of the possessor of truth. The professor's system of reality is a negative one.

The student finally revolts because the things asked of him have no real value. They are systems constructed by man's intellect and are of no real importance. The student

26 Prévert, Paroles, p. 63.
rejects the professor's values, and like Klee, with "toutes les couleurs," he designs happiness. Happiness is multi-colored because the imaginative approach to life is unlimited.

Thus, as indicated in previous poems, the interior feelings of man supply the answer to his absurd condition. His imagination is limitless if unhindered by the workings of the intellect.

Prévert develops these same ideas in a poem entitled "Pour faire le portrait d'un oiseau." In the instructions that Prévert gives, he begins by saying:

Peindre d'abord une cage
avec une porte ouverte

This in itself is a contradiction because to leave the door open is to negate the function of a cage. This is Prévert's way of explaining the human condition. We are trapped in an absurd condition, and therefore let us not complicate the situation further with systems of entrapment. Man must be allowed to roam at will, as free as his imagination.

He continues by saying, "peindre quelque chose de joli, simple, beau, utile." For Prévert, the terms are synonymous. Something "beau" is "simple" and "utile." Beauty is useful to man, and reality is rendered beautiful by an unfettered imagination. Complexities create disharmony and ugliness.

Now, wait for the bird. Sometimes he arrives quickly,
and other times it is necessary to wait many years. There is no timetable that can be set up. One cannot sit down and rationally cause the human spirit to function. Success lies outside of the impetuousness of man:

\[ \text{la vitesse ou la lenteur de l'arrivée de l'oiseau n'ayant aucun rapport avec la réussite du tableau} \]

There is no specific formula for beauty. The appreciation of life must be felt, and this experience cannot be moulded by the mind. It is a natural phenomenon that has to be accepted as such.

When the bird does arrive, erase the bars. The bars are restrictions that impede the experience. The experience must be allowed to leave as freely as it arrived. The mind cannot forcibly imprison inspiration anymore than it can forcibly call it forth. It is a gratuitous phenomenon that follows no laws.

After the bird has arrived, if he does not sing, it is a sign that the painting is bad. But, if he sings, you can then sign your name to the painting. You have succeeded in experiencing the beauty of life.

Thus far, we can see that Prévert, in his answer to the problem of man's absurd condition, finds his solution in an imagination that is able to transform the drab into the beautiful. This phenomenon is not the result of a learned process, but it is rather a normalcy possessed by those who revolt against the rational systems of explanation and suppression. It is an inherent quality of everyone,
by means of which man can transcend his absurd condition and participate in a higher reality. It is through the eye of imagination that one is able to feel the oneness with humanity and nature.

The best summation of Prévert's solution to the human condition can be seen in the poem, "Aux jardins de Miró."²⁸ In this poem, the act of artistic creation is also an act of interpreting life.²⁹ Prévert has rendered art and life synonymous. This is not to say that one escapes into art, but rather that it is the imaginative approach to both art and life. His aesthetic approach is synonymous with his approach to the human condition, in that one intuits art as well as life.

In this poem, Prévert contrasts the institutionalization of art with the dream qualities of Miró. The image of "un drapeau de lavoir flotte sur le Château d'Art," clearly shows his distaste for the systematization of art. For Prévert, this is the sterile intellectual organization of the human spirit into stifling categories that reduce man's ability to perceive beauty in reality. He equates the production of academic art with social institutions that he considers repressive to man.

En somme:
cérémonial analogue à celui des répétitions

²⁸Prévert, Spectacle, p. 206-209.

²⁹Prévert's artistic concepts can also be seen in such poems as "L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts," "Promenade de Picasso," and "Eclaircie."
capitales exécutions générales semaines pontificales grand-messes in extenso et autres commémorations transfigurations et pétrifications Tout à fait comme au jardin d'Acclimatation le jour de l'inauguration du monument au grand Iguanodon ou d'une autre statue à peu de chose près des même nom Tout à fait comme l'Exposition Coloniale quand les amateurs désignent du doigt du connaisseur les hommes de couleur C'est comme cela qu'ils appellent les Noirs dans leur néo-latin de cuisine culturelle posant inconsciemment ce doigt osseux et blême sur leur talon d'Achille leur plaie inavouée leur dévitalisant complexe d'exsanguité Prévert then goes on to compare Miró with the "Noirs."

Et toi Jean Miró
tu ressembles à ces Noirs
tu es depuis longtemps leur frère de couleurs

Miró, like the "Noirs," has been abused because he also refuses to accept the imposition of a system that is not of his own creation. Prévert explains this as he continues to address Miró.

dans le jardin de tes rêves
toujours perdu et toujours retrouvé
dans les herbes folles du Multicolorado

Miró, like the "Noirs," is different. He does not succumb to a system that does not originate from himself. The "Noirs" revolt against a political tyranny, and Miró revolts against accepted artistic standards. He refuses to participate in the world of academia, preferring instead his interior world of reality. And Prévert wishes him:

Bon voyage Joan Miró
Bon voyage en tes paysages et rapporte-nous de là-bas des objets de là-haut
Bon voyage dans tes paysages où l'ombre solaire d'une seule graine de tournesol
suffit à réveiller au travers des persiennes
de la terre une taupe endormie et soudain
éblouie
où les derniers glouglous d'une bouteille
reversée suffisent à dessiner sur une nappe
de papier une très utile et très charmante
petite bacchanale

We can thus see that the objective of art as explained
by Prévert is a non-intellectual approach. The individual
must feel and allow things to happen to him. It is from
this encounter that revelation occurs. This phenomenon is
what truly matters.

Pour le reste
pour les autres
qui dressent le Calendrier des Beaux-Arts
en oubliant toujours et très précisément le facteur
Cheval
laissons-les donner à penser
laissons-les épuiser la question
Il y a tellement peu de grande différence entre
deux qui écrivent l'Histoire de l'Art et les
Grands Peintres d'Histoire
Chacun a sa spécialité
et il faut bien qu'il y ait des spécialistes spécialistes
de spécialités

These are the ones who do not understand Miró. They
are those who cannot appreciate the natural intuitive ap­
proach to life because they need rational systems of ex­
planation. By becoming specialists, they alienate them­
selves from the real people, such as Miró.

Et puis
chaque être
sans le savoir
qui décrit quelque chose
fait toujours en même temps son propre portrait
Et celui qui décrit ostensiblement l'Histoire de
l'Art très fort modestement comme il sied fait
nécessairement et surtout le sien

We are the result of our acts, and those who, like Miró,
feel and allow their true expression to surface are the authentic individuals. The others, represented here by the art historians, are the inauthentic ones who do not allow themselves to function intuitively, thereby denying their true self. They are lost in a world of self-deception where the role replaces their authentic being.

Prévert terminates the poem with a restatement of his previously mentioned position.

Ce n'est pas à l'École des Beaux-Arbres qu'on peut apprendre à voir l'incendie d'une forêt
Joan Miró
Et c'est ma petite fille avant de s'endormir qui elle aussi un soir a fait sans le savoir ton portrait
"J'ai des oiseaux plein les yeux sûrement je vais rêver d'un jardin"
Et c'était vraiment ton portrait

Joan Miró
Ce jardin c'est le même quelque part que le tien.

That which Prévert advocates in art is also his philosophy of life. He negates systems that attempt to explain the human condition. For him, authentic individuals are those who can feel that they are a part of man and nature. They intuitively know beauty and good.

Authenticity is founded in such individuals as "Le balayeur" who revolt against oppressive systems and appreciate the sensual aspect of life. The authentic individual is also represented by those like "Ducon" who recognize their uniqueness. They refuse to be a nameless cog in the wheel. Authentic people are also those who enjoy the
physical nature of love, but who, as in the poem, "Pour toi mon amour," realize that one cannot reduce another to object. They are also like "Les enfants qui s'aiment" who do not allow others to define right and wrong for them. There are those, as in "Chanson du Vitrier," who realize that we are all part of humanity, each dependent upon the other. There are those who recognize the danger of intellectualism, retaining instead the feelings of childhood in which beauty and love were felt, because a philosophical explanation of reality was not needed. There are those like Miró whose intuitive approach to reality is reflected in his dream-like canvases. Miró represents a negation of a rational explanation of reality.

This is Prévert's solution to man's absurd condition. It is a solution that requires no philosophical system. Rather, it asks that man be natural, that man realize the beauty of birds, that he allow his imagination to transform and transcend his absurd condition.

It is quite clear that Prévert has synthesized his revolt against the absurd with an aesthetic approach to reality in which love of man and nature results from a reliance upon man's intuitive faculties. It assumes that all men, if unencumbered by imposed or self-created systems, have something in common with each other. This bond that exists between men is not a result of intellectual endeavors, but it is rather the result of man allowing his feelings to dominate his intellect. This feeling is
non-communicable because it has to be felt, and it is through this feeling that the love of man and nature renders the absurd neutral.

This vision of Prévert encompasses all men. It is an affirmation of life, a life that is to be lived intuitively.
CONCLUSION

In the chapter that dealt with Prévert's encounter with the absurd, it was seen that he, as other twentieth century writers, painted héroïds of despair who did not transcend their absurd condition. They did not revolt in the name of mankind by declaring themselves authentic individuals who affirmed the dignity of man.

Prévert did not remain a poet of despair, but exhibited the traits that showed the importance of the individual. He used the means of his craft to elevate the importance of man. His poetry became human.¹

Prévert's revolt against the absurd was also reflected in his revolt against the traditional modes of artistic expression. With him, "le langage n'est pas seulement moyen d'expression; il constitue la matière même de la poésie."² The mode of expression is a reflection of the subject treated by the poet.

Prévert's plea is one of an authentic approach to life that is unencumbered by philosophical systems of behavior; nor by artistic rules that suppress the expressiveness of man. For him, the expression of art is the

expression of life. There are neither guidelines for art nor for life. The approach to both must come from man's interior.

Prévert's fear of the dehumanization of man seems to be best expressed by René Dubos.

Man can learn to tolerate treeless avenues, starless skies, tasteless food, a monotonous succession of holidays which have become spiritless and meaningless because they are no longer holy days, a life without the fragrance of flowers, the song of birds, the joyous intoxication of spring, or the melancholy of autumn.3

Prévert admonishes man to feel life and to reject any sort of system to explain his existence. He wants man to follow his feelings; love the things of nature, accept the beauty of a bird, the physical enjoyment of a caress, without becoming involved in a rational discussion that attempts to dissect his motivations. We are of this earth, possessing certain drives and instincts. We should cultivate these and allow the full play of our imagination to transform reality into a pleasurable existence.

We should not rely upon the intellect to extricate us from our absurd condition; rather we should rely upon the validity of our intuitive approach to reality to answer the absurd. Man is intertwined with nature, and the call upon his intelligence to pompously tell him he is above the

---

feelings he possesses is a denial of his true essence.

When the aesthetics of Prévert are examined, it is clear that his approach to art is also his approach to life. Both are synonymous. The exhaltation of the sensual in life is the exhaltation of the sensual in art. The imaginative properties of man are more valid than his rational explanations of life.

Thus, Prévert's solution to the absurd is through the intuitive approach to reality in which there is the establishment of the brotherhood of man.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Periodicals


VITA

William Frank Adams, Jr., was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on July 16, 1939. He attended the public schools of Mobile, Alabama, graduating from Murphy High School in June, 1957. At the University of Southern Mississippi, he received the Bachelor of Arts degree in June, 1965. In May, 1967, he received the Master of Arts degree from Louisiana State University. He is presently a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at Louisiana State University.
Candidate:  William Frank Adams, Jr.

Major Field:  French

Title of Thesis:  The World of Prévert:  Encounter with the Absurd

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination:

May 6, 1970