

1. *The Preface: On Radical Absurdity*

MONTAIGNE NEVER READ *Understanding Media* yet there's a good deal of point to what he says about the relation between our animal and our human extensions:

no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs . . .
on the loftiest throne in the world we still are only sitting on our own rump.

That he discovered his *métier* in the printed book seems obvious, despite his protesting his attachment to animal extensions like legs and rump. The question remains, where in the range of extensions do we locate our being? We have only to think of trumpeter and trumpet instead of king and throne to see the problem. Montaigne often chafes against the unified consciousness imposed by print, and a trumpeter, however much his trumpet means to him, might likewise if his only mode of awareness was his trumpet complain of limitation. Our worry is about freedom. Twentieth-century man has many modes of consciousness and with these goes a freedom not enjoyed by any previous civilization. It is this freedom, so terrible a freedom that we don't like looking at it, a freedom we've hardly recognized to date, a freedom radically unlike any that mankind has yet known, that I find myself wanting to celebrate in absurdist plays and in satirical verse. Satire is often a ritual of acceptance by which a Swift, a Sterne, or a Percy Wyndham Lewis castigates the crossing of territorial lines, while conceding to the future its power to innovate. Or is it exploration — I won't claim that in attempts at theatre of the absurd I've been engaged in exploration; celebrate is the right word. This new freedom I have been celebrating is really a very wonderful development — it dictates the very unrealistic settings I find myself using, and

POEM AND PREFACE

Wilfred Watson

these, involving the use of multi-environments, determine the kind of dramatic texture I have been able to achieve in scripts like *Cockcrow and the Gulls* (1962), *Trial of Corporal Adam* (1963), *Another Bloody Page from Plutarch* (1963/4), *Wail for Two Pedestals* (1964/1965) and *Over Prairie Trails* (a farcical dramatization of Grove's novel).

In *Cockcrow and the Gulls* I couldn't really get started until I'd killed off all the human characters and reassembled them in a sort of limbo, where I could confront them with an atypical absurdist impasse, the fact that when you are dead you cannot die. The following excerpt is from the beginning of the play, but I think it adumbrates in its non-realistic realism the multi-realism of the second half of this work.

GWLADYS	Kiss me, Cyril.
HIGGINS	Forgive me, mate. It was an accident. . . .
GWLADYS	You'll hang for this mate.
HIGGINS	This boy here will testify it was an accident.
GWLADYS	You should've done it in England, mate. An English jury would've been lenient. All yer'd have got would've been life, with time off for good behaviour. But a Canadian jury will never let you off for killing a wife. Mark what I say — These are my dying words to you mate. You'll hang for it. So yer'd better prepare yer soul to meet yer maker.

HIGGINS *(bitterly)*
 So yer dying happy mother?

GWLADYS You'll never be prime minister.
 Not being of an irreproachable character.
 Yer might have been able to hush up yer whores, but not murder.

HIGGINS And so yer dying happy mother?
 Because in yer last mortal act
 You think yer've ruined all my political
 Intent? — Cyril, Cyril, mark
 Yer mother, mate, she's dying happy, happy as a lark.
(raises teapot in his hand to strike her again, but Cyril intervenes)

GWLADYS Go on, go on.

HIGGINS *(to Cyril)*
 Son,
 Don't yer go shining yer dubious light on us now, son.
(flings Cyril aside)
 Now yer can die happy mate.
(hits her again and again with teapot)
 It's murder now mate.
(Cyril drags himself to his feet, exit)
 How right you were, Sir Francis . . .
 In yer fine essay of friendship!
 A friend can speak to a friend without respect of persons,
 But a husband can speak only to his wife as a husband,
 Etcetera, etcetera. *(calls)* Cyril!
 A father can only speak to his son, as a father.
 A murderer can speak to no one, except as a fugitive!
(re-enter Cyril)
 Cyril . . . where are you, boy? . . . I won't hurt you!
(Cyril stares at him)
 Mate, I'm not a murderer.
 Won't anyone tell me I'm not a murderer?
 Mate, she poked her finger right into the eye of my flaw.
 She picked at the scab in my soul.
 She bitched at the hangnail of my self-command, when I had very
 little
 Reserves, and defense none at all. . . .

In *Trial of Corporal Adam*, which begins in the medieval world of *Everyman*, Adam is whisked away from occupied Berlin into a multiple world in which, at his trial, Death is judge, the Church, prosecutor, the devil, defense lawyer, and Noah, Moses, David, Bathsheba witnesses.

HOLY CHURCH What sort of soldier was Uriah?
 BATHSHEBA A brave soldier.
 HOLY CHURCH Was he a better soldier than David?
 BATHSHEBA Yes.—No.
 HOLY CHURCH What sort of soldier was Adam.
 BATHSHEBA I don't know.
 David thought Adam was a good soldier, and said so.
 HOLY CHURCH I will call the next witness.
 (*exit Bathsheba*)
 ADAM (*to wife*)
 Did you see David weeping?
 This David honest king does my heart good.
 He remembered me. He didn't forget me.
 He spoke of me, you see to Bathsheba.
 Bathsheba didn't forget me either — what David said of me.
 God loved him, and he will me, eventually.
 I will repent myself to God, as David did.
 MEPHISTOFILIS (*to Adam*)
 But he doesn't exist. Be re-assured. . . .

In *Another Bloody Page from Plutarch* the action takes place in classical Bononia, first of all, and later on at Caieta. But multiple environments are important, as in the following song. Collaged together in it are: the world of the leopardess, the jungle; that of the shepherdess, classical pastoral; and the double world of Lepidus and of Mr Lepidus, the triumvirate of Rome and its modern analogue suggestive of names like Profumo, Christine Keeler and Gerda Munsinger.

DORICANUS And as for the wicked leopardess
 CHIRICUS Who left behind her such a nasty mess
 DORICANUS She never expected to find a shepherdess
 CHIRICUS In the bed of old Mr Lepidus.

In *Wail for Two Pedestals* the action is located on, off and beside the two pedestals. The Godot who doesn't appear in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* stands on one of these pedestals. The daughter of the Lefty who doesn't appear in *Waiting for Lefty* climbs up on to the other pedestal. These two pedestals enable me to whirl round them a large number of contemporary environments, including those in the following excerpts:

CHORUS Here we go round the thunderstorm.
 m We are the hollow men.
 M Hollow men, unite.

You have nothing to lose except your telephones.
 f (*kneeling to M*)
 Father, forgive me, I have sinned.
 M In what kind have you sinned, daughter?
 f The sin of the flesh, father.
 M With whom, daughter?
 f I am in love with a married man, father.
 M What is his occupation, daughter.
 f He is my husband, father.
 M Then you are in mortal sin, daughter.
 Think of yourself as in danger of damnation.
 f What shall I do about it, father?
 M Leave him at once.
 f I can't help it, father.
 M God will help you, daughter.
 f I want to love him all
 the time, father.
 M Then you had better get
 him to divorce you, daughter.
 f He can't afford it, father.
 M It's all right as long as you
 don't use those things, daughter.
 f *What* things do you mean, father?
 M Those things.
 f *Pills*, father?
 M Those things, daughter.
 (*thunder*)
 m Thunder!
 f An electric storm.
 m A flash of lightning!
 (*taking f's hand*)
 Here we go round the
 eye of the storm!
 f Amen!

In *Over Prairie Trails* the world of the horses, Peter and Dan, is contrasted with the world of Grove; Peter and Dan are caught in a sort of concentration-camp environment, which is epicyclic to the circle which Grove makes between Gladstone and Falmouth, through cold, fog, storm and blizzard conditions which urge Grove on to heroic efforts and impose on the horses the hell out of which they cannot escape. In this excerpt Dan wakes up the exhausted Peter and tries to console him.

DAN You understand, don't you?
 PETER Yes I understand all right you've woken me up just
 to tell me that what's happened today hasn't
 gone unobserved.
 DAN I'm sorry I've made you angry, Peter.
 PETER (*after a pause*)
 Daniel, you have an inclination towards the cosmic fallacy.
 DAN What's that my friend?
 PETER Beloved, it's the belief not well grounded that the
 tragic affairs of horses and men have cosmic significance.
 (*gestures*)
 That the stars have eyes.

I have perhaps given enough excerpts by way of example to suggest that the collaging together of two or more milieus makes possible a treatment of an absurdist theatre not altogether unlike but by no means identical with that modern theatre movement dominated by Camus's sentiment of the absurd, where men and their questionings are answered by the blank meaningless of the world.

As I understand the new freedom, multi-media man has many worlds and many modes of awareness — as many in fact as he has media; and the significant thing is, these modes of consciousness are not unified by language, whether spoken, written or printed. This fact must, I believe, force upon us a new concept of the absurd. Formerly man could reason in a mode of awareness which was given him through language, but today man has many kinds of awareness, and to an increasing degree no two men are likely to have the same mix of the multi-consciousnesses available. Professor McLuhan has spoken of modern society as being without centres. Modern man has no centralized consciousness, he is off-centre, eccentric in a radical new way.

Comedy in the past has been a sort of oddman affair, an affair of a deviant within a group, amusing but not particularly disturbing. It is when all the members of a group are uncentred, without centre in either the group or elsewhere, that the phenomenon becomes shattering. The group whether family or society becomes little more than the cardboard carton in which when we are moving house we put plates, cups and miscellaneous items, and discard as having discharged its function when the move is over. As men in relationship with each other become more configurative, the cartons in which they exist come to seem all the more obviously cartons. This fact has led Professor Royce to write a book entitled *The Encapsulated Man*. He opens with this observation:

Modern movements such as existentialism and the revival of interest in religion point rather decisively to the inadequacy of traditional values. And the restless searching which is manifest in the major cultural outlets, such as the arts and science, are indicative of the inability of traditional symbols to carry the weight of a meaningful existence. This book concerns itself with this search for meaning, particularly the search of 20th-century man.

My thesis is that such a search demands total involvement and maximum awareness, but that man is encapsulated.

It is not surprising that the U.S. military has had trouble with its university-trained recruits. The army has become an encapsulation, a meaningless carton, particularly hated by university graduates each with his own brand of multi-consciousness and not easily brain-washed. Even the universities have become an encapsulation to many students and staff. Those who want to condition modern eccentric man may discover that this can only be done by reducing him to a feral condition. It may not be easy to make a modern concentration camp work — not nearly so easy as it used to be, when inmates had a unified consciousness, to be peeled off like a skin. Multi-consciousness doesn't strip back easily because it is acquired by doing rather than by seeing. Because he is civilized not in one direction only but in all sorts of directions, modern eccentric man has great contempt for the cardboard carton type of classification. Jean Genet expresses this contempt, especially in *The Blacks*, a play about colour of skin as a means of social classification. Professor George S. Wellwarth discusses this play as follows:

In *The Blacks* Genet tries to make the Negro's real attitude clear to the whites. . . . The action of *The Blacks* is very simple. A group of Negroes enacts the ritual murder of a white woman. Another group of Negroes, wearing white masks and dressed in the trappings that give the whites their illusory authority, sits in judgment on them. Instead of being judged, however, the Negroes "kill" the "Whites". While the Negroes on stage are going through this mock catharsis, the real action of the play is transpiring offstage. A Negro traitor is condemned and shot, and at the end it becomes clear to the white audience that the whole play was merely an elaborate, conscious cover-up to disguise an incident in the war of the Negroes on the whites.

(*Theater of Protest and Paradox*, New York, 1964, pp. 126ff.)

Genet has no sympathy for the Blacks or for the whites, only a compulsive distaste for banality of classification.

I shot a trumpet into my brain is a sort of manifesto-poem about what seems to me the central fact in modern civilization, its multiplicity of media. This is a fact to which every artist and every writer must address himself. The unique soul is out. Compared to the new psyche, it seems something of a fraud. What is in, is personality made up of selective configurations of public modes of consciousness. There are numerous options available to this new human being, more by a long shot than there are to a General Motors car — and each implies a mode of awareness. These options are being used. It makes communication very difficult when sending station and receiving station are incompatible. Massman is on the way out (in any case, massman was probably an early twentieth-century myth, for, as Lewis in part sees in *The Apes of God*, broadcasting creates broadcasters not listeners.) Eccentric man is on the way in, for the addition of mass media is like the addition of electrical resistances in parallel: the more media, the fewer the masses. The combinations of consciousness possible can be roughly realized if we set down the 26 letters of the alphabet, and starting with the mass-media, match them with some common medium. Thus: (a) TV, (b) radio, (c) motion picture, (d) telephone, (e) telegraph, (f) daily press, (g) weekly news magazines, (h) recordings, (i) automobile, (j) jet plane, (k) railway, (l) tape recorder, (m) camera, (n) gestettner, (o) xerox, (p) typewriter, (q) fountain pen, (r) powerboat, (s) bicycle, (t) motor scooter, (u) sewing machine, (v) hairdryer, (w) electric light, (x) vacuum cleaner, (y) adding machine, (z) credit card. If we tried to unify the various consciousnesses involved in this list, we should need a language something like Joyce's in *Finnegans Wake*, "wordloosed over seven seas crowdblast incellelleneteutoslavzendlatin-soundscrip." There are advantages to every man being his own nation, but the life of eccentric man is bound to be chaotic, in his sexual, family, economic and political relations. Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds/ Admit impediments") may have to be re-written ("let's not forget when contemplating marriage of minds as diverse as ours, the difficulties of intersubjectivity"). But quite obviously the radical absurdity we face is to be distinguished from the absurd Camus wrote of in the *Myth of Sisyphus* during the middle 1930's:

For me, the sole datum is the absurd . . . a confrontation and an unceasing struggle.

And carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion, I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual

rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to mature unrest).

What we must explain to ourselves today is why our new radical absurdity induces in us hope, acceptance and complacency. Perhaps the reason is that what has produced this new twentieth-century man is the extraordinary development of the human extensions of man. Consequently though the new absurdity ought to be enough to sober us, in fact eccentric man causes in us a sense of elation — we are for the moon, come what may.

What we probably will have to do is seek help from the artist in solving the problems of multi-consciousness. It could be that the social order of tomorrow will depend on artists of great talent. Already if we examine modern art and literature we find a very sharp distinction between a very few famous men and the rank-and-file of artists and writers whose work is for the most part paraphrase and whose numbers tend to approximate to the sum-total of population — it would almost seem as if the best way to understand eccentric man would be to equate him with the rank-and-file of creative talents. What differentiates the men of great talent from this wider group of minor talents is the fact that the former — men like Picasso, Henry Moore, Wyndham Lewis, Corbusier, Marshall McLuhan — have all attempted to exert an integrating force of some sort or other on thought and society. Common to them is their sense of the complexity of a special kind which multi-consciousness entails upon modern society, their sense of the problem of eccentric man. The rank-and-file of minor artists pride themselves on their discovery that they are different from others and have missed the point that today the common man is just one of them. The great artists have worked in reaction to this fact though without necessarily understanding the real problem. Both Joyce and Wyndham Lewis for example understood that multi-media meant multi-consciousness, but neither knew how to relate themselves as artists to the audience of eccentrics growing up around them. The fact of the eccentricity of modern man was clear to them; but they did not discover what to do with this fact or what was their role with respect to it. Perhaps the singular distinction of Marshall McLuhan is his seeming ability to write *for*, not merely *with*, the new eccentric.

2. *The Poem:*

I Shot a Trumpet into my Brain

I would not have you think that I am shut out from a sense of what is called by the Japanese “the Ah-ness of things”; the melancholy inherent in the animal life. But there is a *Ho-ho-ness* too. And against the backgrounds of their sempiternal *Ah-ness* it is possible, strictly in the foreground, to proceed with a protracted comedy, which glitters against the darkness.

P. Wyndham Lewis

I shot a trumpet into my brain
where it blew out my brains became a wall.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
my skull bone grew into a tower.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
and my arm extended into an amphitheatre.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
my two buttocks became a double bed.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
and my starved backbone became a plough.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
my cadaver demanded a lecture hall.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
and my ah-ness became a cathedral farm.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
my ho-ho-ness protracted itself into a monastic town.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
my sensorium was infected with a,b,c's.

I shot a trumpet into my brain
in the lesion festered a printing press
I shot a trumpet into my brain
which began to print the Palestrina mass.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
and my right hand became a cannon ball.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
and the tears in my eyes dried into gunpowder
I shot a trumpet into my brain
and my blood ticked away into a clock.

Madam Sosostriis
is dead

Madam Sosostriis
is dead

How shall we know what to do?

Madam Sosostriis is dead.

She had just sat down to close her eyes
in the fortune-teller's throne beside her bed
and now the world is at the telephone telling the news
the world is swinging its thin cold knees,
Madame Sosostriis is dead!

2.

I shot a trumpet into my brain
my left eye became a telescope.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
my blasted eye-socket suffered a sea-change.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
and by a conversion became a navigator's sextant.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
through a fragment of bone I saw a new moon.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
and my armpit blackened into a coal-mine.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
my left testicle becoming a spinning machine.
I shot a trumpet into my brain

and when I blew my nose, *there* was a blast furnace.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 and my spilled dreams became a circulating library.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 my severed ear became a threshing machine.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 and my hamstrings developed into a steam locomotive.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 and my jarred nerves extended into the electric telegraph
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 ventilating my conscience in a telegram.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 and my thoughts re-arranged themselves into the morning newspaper
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 jazzing my insomnias up into head lines.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 then my blind third eye opened and became a camera.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 and my vocal chords were transverberated into a telephone.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 my fingers being paralyzed into an electric computer.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 and my sex became a frozen bank of sperm.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 and my bowel became a polluted river.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 my delirium became a bottle of champagne.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 and my fragmented eye became a motion picture machine.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 collaging my lips tongue and ears into a T.V. screen.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 and my bladder was canonized into a gas station.
I shot a trumpet into my brain
 all my instincts solidified into a moon machine.
I shot a trumpet into my brain

my fart fathered an intercontinental rocket.

I shot a trumpet into my brain

and it opened a door

which was a means of
control the beginning
of law

and you are in

and I am out

and knock knock

knock, I am knock

and you are

knocker.

I shot a trumpet into my brain

My excrements became an underground sewer.

I shot a trumpet into my brain

this was the beginning of egghead fun,

ho-ho,

look down into the trumpet's mouth and you shall come
to the ah-ah-ness I am extending from.

oh no,

I shot a trumpet into my brain

I pulverized my heart into a contraceptive pill,

amen!

I shot a trumpet into my brain!