Paranoid Poetics: Prisoners of Words in the Absurd Theater of Adamov

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The theater of Arthur Adamov can be divided in two periods: the first one is often referred to as “avant-garde” or “absurd”: it is produced between 1947 and 1954 and characterized by critics such as Emmanuel Jacquart. The second period is “historical” or “political”. Adamov disowned his early ones on the grounds that they are disengaged from all struggle, and practically supportive of all oppressive powers, because of their vague referential quality, which assures their political harmlessness. He will later prefer plays specifically dated and located.

The plots remain in an abstract and timeless realm, without any claim on current reality. According to Adamov’s harsh judgment, which he later extends to “avant-garde” theater in general, his early plays use metaphors, avoiding realism to the point of turning into a codified system at once simplistic and irrelevant to the human condition.

A. The precarious and repressive order of the literal

Typically, Adamov’s characters evolve in a world, which is more nightmarish than dream-like, and they remain isolated and often persecuted by undefined, yet potent powers. In order to understand his early theater based on expressionist solitude, one may refer to his subsequent rejection of his first model, Strindberg, to whom he opposes Tchekhov:

Quand je pense à Tchekhov, je pense à l’homme qui comprend que la solitude existe, non pas sous la forme schématique et élémentaire que lui donne Strindberg, avec des hommes et des femmes qui se font des petits signaux dont certains sont momentanément identifiés, si bien que ne surgit pas cette solitude expressionniste et vulgaire — celle de l’avant-garde que je déteste tant aujourd’hui — mais une demi-solitude, une demi-communion, un théâtre complexe. En d’autres termes, le théâtre “engagé” … me semble beaucoup plus subtil que le théâtre “non engagé”.

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1 I thank the librarians of the university of Wisconsin-Madison, and Wichita State University who helped with my research.
3 Arthur Adamov, “Paolo Paoli, c’est la demi-conscience” in Ici et maintenant (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 52: “Je n’aime plus du tout ces pièces (de moi ou des autres) qui ne se passent nulle part et qui arragent trop bien ceux qui font de mauvais coups en des endroits, pour des raisons, contre des gens bien précis”; “I don’t like these plays any more, not at all (by myself or by others) taking place nowhere and all too beneficial for those who carry on wrong-doings in very specific places, for very precise reasons, against very particular people.” All translations are mine.
4 Adamov, “On demande un nouveau théâtre” in Ici, ibid., 130: “When I think of Tchekhov, I think of the man who understands that solitude exists, but not under the simplified and elementary form Strindberg gives it, with men and women exchanging minimal signals some of which are momentarily identified, so that this type of expressionist and vulgar solitude does not appear—this avant-garde solitude that I detest so much today—but a half-solitude, a half-communion, a complex theater. In other words, to me, ‘engaged’ theater …. seems much more subtle than the type of theater which is not ‘engaged.’”
Adamov was first brought to theater through Strindberg whose plays he admired, and particularly *Le Songe* (*The Dream*), staged by Artaud and Vitrac in 1927). With his first play, *La Parodie* (*The Parody*), staged for the first time in 1952, written in 1947, Adamov uses dialogues, which immediately reach a dead end. Indeed, the scenes are staged as monologues: “Mais je n’abandonnais pas pour autant l’idée maîtresse de *La Parodie*. personne n’entend personne. Je trouvais vexant que moi, qui avais si bien démontré l’impossibilité de toute conversation, je fusse obligé d’écrire, tout comme un autre, de simples dialogues.” This passage refers to Adamov’s next play, *L’Invasion* (*The Invasion*, 1949), where characters do hear each other, but they do not say what they have to say.

In *La Parodie* one can rightly speak of a self-referential language, because characters talk themselves into an illusory communication with others, and also because language becomes allegorical and thus more faithful to its internal literal coherence than to outside reality. Of all his early plays, Adamov will respect only *Le Professeur Taranne* (*Professor Taranne*, 1950), because it is but a transcription of a real dream (“transcription non truquée d’un rêve de la nuit”), of which nothing is used for allegorical purposes (“je n’ai utilisé aucun des éléments de mon rêve à des fins allégoriques”). Adamov’s early theater then uses a systematical language to a certain extent disconnected from reality, coherent in itself but yet fragmentary, similar to a machine independent from the rest of the world. One cannot but recall Sartre’s *Nausée* (1938), where Roquentin experiences fulfillment only while listening to the jazz song produced by a juke-box. To a certain extent, the electric billiards in *Ping-Pong* (1955) play on the same principles.

Despite what Adamov later claims in his “Introduction au ‘Théâtre II’” (“Introduction to ‘Theater II’”, 1955), his characters create their own illusory traps in language as early as his very first play. Indeed, Adamov could say about *La Parodie*, what he then applies to *Ping-Pong* and his second volume of plays: “Les deux amis vont, eux-même, creuser les galeries dans lesquelles ils trébuchent ... La menace ne vient pas que du dehors; les personnages secrètent leur propre poison, préparent leur propre malheur...” His characters’ misfortunes often come from their seduction by external factors—the seductress Lili in *La Parodie*, the electric billiards in *Ping-Pong*. Love and attraction lead to destructive impersonal (anti-personal) superstructures.

It is not even necessary to appeal to the Lacanian pun on the origin of language in infants (“non/nom du père”), which connects the child with the external world in a linguistic fashion at the cost of repression/castration, in order to observe that in Adamov’s theater, language issues from the parental couple, who is in league with the censorship applied by society. When in love, the male characters are attracted to women who are essentially of dubious gender, or narrowly associated to the masculine. Thus, for

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5 Adamov, “Introduction au ‘Théâtre II’” in *Ici, ibid.*, 18: “But I still did abandon the main idea of *La Parodie*: nobody hears anybody. I found it humiliating that I, who had demonstrated so well the impossibility of any conversation, should find myself forced to write simple dialogues, like anybody else.”

6 Adamov, “Ma ‘métamorphose’” in *Ici, ibid.*, 142.


8 *Ibid.*, 26: “Both friends are going to dig their own trenches to trip in ... The menace does not come only from outside; the characters produce their own poison, they prepare their own misfortune...”
N., for the Employee, or for the director of a newspaper entitled “l’Avenir” (“Future”), self-delusion of felicity is triggered by Lili’s apparent feminine presence. Yet Lili is not purely feminine insofar as the literal order is concerned. As the Journalist professionally spells it out for us—“Deux l, deux i; el, i; el, i. Lili, Lili!”—the masculine element of Lili’s name is revealed since it alternates between “elle” (she) and “il” (he). Lili’s association with the literal order, which is also controlled in part by the Journalist, is the theme of her love for him, thus completing the picture of a symbolic parental couple in league with the literal order of society, and teaming against the male lover who wants to approach the woman he fancies.

It follows that words cannot be trusted, and that they are not only repressive, but self-containing and destructive. Oblivious to Lili’s departure as well as to her reply, the Employee sets up a rendez-vous with her:

L’Employé, saisissant la main de Lili.—Je suis très pris, mais pour vous, je me rendrai libre. Je vous promets... à neuf heures précises devant le Royal.
... L’Employé, qui n’a pas remarqué le départ de Lili.—Je ne sais comment vous remercier. Aucun mot ne peut dire la joie... À neuf heures précises devant le Continental... Je vous attendrai aussi longtemps qu’il faudra.10

Lili will leave future appointments to chance rather than to actual scheduling. The referential quality of words remains so problematical that oral contracts are as (un)reliable as chance. Lili seems to bet on the latter, while the Employee relies on his own words. As for the last sentence of this passage, it plainly demonstrates that the Employee does not trust them completely either, since he expects her to be on time (at two different places at once) and yet delay for an indefinite period of time. Language is such that the characters remain isolated in their own precarious verbal webs, talking themselves into imaginary appointments with people who never come because they too are rushing to their own fictitious rendez-vous.

The prologue contrasts a placard on which is written, “l’Amour vainqueur” (“Victorious Love”) with a couple mutely arguing. It seems that if some kind of love triumphs it is unrequited love, insuring the characters’ solitude. Because they are blind and deaf to one another, they are enthralled by their own imaginary world, and vice versa, their imaginary world and the symbolic order of language keep them apart. For instance, despite (and because of) the fact that one can see nothing in the darkness of night, the Employee knows that the scenery looks like no other, when he arrives to his self-appointed meeting at a spot he never saw before: “Si le temps était plus clair, s’il ne faisait pas aussi noir, on verrait certainement la campagne, on verrait très loin, aussi loin

9 Adamov, Théâtre I (Paris: Gallimard, 1953) 31: The pun does not work in English. One may also take note of the proliferation of letters generated by Lili whose name seems to multiply.
10 Ibid., 16: “The Employee, grasping Lili’s hand.—I am very busy, but I’ll free myself for you. I promise you... at nine sharp in front of the Royal. Lili, walking away.—Let’s rely on chance rather, won’t you? It sets up things so well. Very happy to have met you. See you soon, I hope ... The Employee, who has not taken notice of Lili’s departure.—I don’t know how to thank you. No word could express the joy... At nine sharp in front of the Continental... I shall wait for you as long as necessary.”
qu’on peut voir.” Of course, this declaration is interrupted by an eye-doctor, off-stage, asking his myopic client whether he sees well close up. It seems obvious at this point that Cupid mischievous actions are prefigured by the painted placard hanging in the backdrop, and love’s blindness is also deaf to all human inaudible dialogues. If they are not purely self-referential and undeliverable, words do not allow trustworthy declarations of love, nor contractual meetings.

Even the director of the newspaper “l’Avenir”, whose work consists of foretelling future reality, is occasionally shortsighted, a matter revealing once more the random nature of words’ relationship to phenomena. Between the Director and the Journalist, it is a matter of the blind leading the blind: “Le Journaliste: (il se penche vers le Directeur et le scrute attentivement comme pour faire un diagnostic de son mal).—Voilà la seconde fois que je vous prends en défaut de clairvoyance. Comment pouvez-vous, vous, douter de l’Avenir?” If the director of the journal entitled “Future” remains unable to see, metaphorical blindness is not insight, and words are irrelevant to communication because they have no stable link with the objective world. At least the coincidence between words and things is at best occasional. This way, the Journalist cannot recognize the Employee’s description of Lili, whom they both know, because they use different words to describe her.

Yet, occasionally words meet with reality, just as lovers encounter one another—accidently and always with a delay:

Savez-vous que je vous ai cherché partout. Je suis allée jusqu’à l’aérodrome. J’y ai rencontré Georges, il cherchait Andrée; nous sommes partis ensemble. En rentrant, devinez qui je vois? Antoine qui croyait avoir rendez-vous avec moi ... J’ai vu aussi Pierre. Il avait oublié ses papiers. Il a été les chercher en face. Je l’ai attendu une heure, deux heures, je ne sais plus. Il n’est pas revenu ... Je vous ai attendu comme cela jusqu’à la tombée de la nuit ... Tu m’avais pourtant promis...

Oddly enough, while waiting endlessly for the Journalist, Lili develops familiarity with her ever absent date. She ends up calling him “tu”, the familiar address, rather than the formal one reserved for first encounters. She does use “vous” for the better part of the description of her search, until she reproaches him for not being where she expected his arrival. Eventually, the journalist denies the reliability to his own words: “Je ne promets jamais rien.” Neither do words in general. His denial only echoes Lili’s reply from the first scene: “Une promesse? Moi, je vous ai promis quelque chose, vous en êtes sûr?

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11 Ibid., 12: “If the weather were clearer, if it were not so dark, one would certainly see the countryside, one would see very far, as far as one can see.”
12 Ibid., 23: “The Journalist: (he leans over towards the Director and carefully scrutinizes him as if to diagnose his sickness).—This is the second time that I catch you showing a lack of vision. How can you, yourself, doubt the ‘Future?’”
13 Ibid., 52-53: “Do you know that I looked for you everywhere. I went all the way to the airport. I met Georges there, he was looking for Andrée; we left together. On the way back, guess who I saw? Antoine who believed that he had a rendez-vous with me ... I also saw Pierre. He had forgotten his papers. He went across the street to look for them. I waited for an hour, two hours, I don’t know at this point. He did not return ... I waited for you in this manner till nightfall ... you had promised ...”
14 Ibid., 53: “I never promise anything.”
Après tout c’est possible, je vois tant de monde. S’il fallait se souvenir de tout ce qu’on dit?15 Indeed, the characters remain trapped but not bound by their own words, timed by haphazard clocks, such as Lili’s handless watch.16 And yet words, like people, hold no promise but for disappointments.

Somehow, out of the inescapable solitude motivated by one’s seduction by the literal, some comfort can be gained. If one is determined to be destroyed by words, not only despite oneself but actively as is the character N., one may rely on the approximated accomplishment of one’s masochistic desires: “Si je ne me trompe pas, c’est N. Il a été écrasé... Par une voiture probablement. On ne voit pas toujours venir les choses. (Pause.) En somme, il a eu ce qu’il voulait. A peu de choses près...”17 Ironically, the self-destructive N. blindly obtained satisfaction to the extent that he willed his own death, contributing to his own destruction. He asks a female prostitute to trample him, and eventually he is run over by a car.

Masochism concurs with the external conditions of a world at war—as the recurrent sounds of round up raids recall—a society bent on self-destruction. Within this aggressive frame, one may have only one freedom left, the choice of one’s style of exit out of the world: “Je n’ai pas choisi de vivre, mais si je pouvais choisir ma mort...”18 Whether Lili consents to do so or not becomes irrelevant, since N. will live in the self-assured illusion that she is about to witness his last moments. He finds satisfaction in his own illusion of control, in his personal word-created fate. So does Lili, who chooses to leave the Journalist with whom she thought she had an appointment for another self-imposed duty which seems more compelling than her lover’s offer to spend the evening with her.

Adamov reveals the incident which first motivated his theater and led to the writing of La Parodie, in his “Introduction au ‘Théâtre II’”: “Un aveugle demandait l’aumône; deux jeunes filles passèrent près de lui sans le voir, le bousculèrent par mégarde; elles chantaient: ‘J’ai fermé les yeux, c’était merveilleux...’ L’idée me vint alors de monter sur la scène, le plus grossièrement et le plus visiblement possible, la solitude humaine, l’absence de communication.”19 Indeed, the girls are engrossed in their verbal dream-world, and they are blinder and less connected to their surroundings than a blind person. Not only do words mean something different for everybody, when they coincide with reality, it is often with a cruel ironical twist. Words compose a self-centered destructive dream-world, which turns out to be harmful to others as to oneself; clearly

15 Ibid., 14: “A promise? Me, I promised something to you, you are sure about it? After all it is possible, I see so many people. If one were to remember everything one says!”
16 Ibid., 15.
17 Ibid., 51: “I am not wrong, this is N. He got run over... by a car probably. One does not always see oncoming things. (Pause.) Eventually, he got what he wanted. Approximately...”
18 Ibid., 17: “I did not choose to live, but if I could choose my death... (Pause.) You assured me that you would kill me, kill me.”
19 Adamov, “Introduction au ‘Théâtre II’” in Ici, op. cit., 17: “A blind man was pan handling; two young girls walked by him and did not watch where they were going, and bumped into him inadvertently; they were singing: ‘I closed my eyes, it was wonderful...’ I got the idea of setting human loneliness and the absence of communication on stage, as coarsely and as visibly as possible.”
words kill in *La Parodie* and more specifically they demonstrate their inadequacy to refer to the objective world except in destruction.

In his “Avertissement à *La Parodie* et à *L’Invasion*”, Adamov pleads for a theater of gestures bypassing the narrow limits of language: “Un théâtre vivant, c’est-à-dire un théâtre où les gestes, les attitudes, la vie propre du corps ont le droit de se libérer de la convention du langage, de passer outre aux conventions psychologiques, en un mot d’aller jusqu’au bout de leur signification profonde.” Gestures of impulses and drives are proposed as authentic theater, because they finally allowing meaning to come forth. Yet, denouncing the limiting functions of common language, Adamov’s early theater remains a claustrophobic depiction of characters trapped in inadequate, unauthentic words, which are essentially repressive, and mutilating.

**B. In search of an authentic verb**

Adamov’s early attachment to the Surrealists (he even attempted to enter their group) explains his efforts in creating a new theatrical language with the aim of restructuring family ties and, by extension, social order. Unsurprisingly, the hero in *L’Invasion* is in search of another language. Pierre is engaged in deciphering the manuscript of his wife’s dead brother. It is virtually illegible, and he finds himself worried that he will replace the dead man’s original words with his own. Not only are words given for others in this play,21 the repressive characterization of the Mother appears for the first time, and she is clearly “in bed” with an oppressive State. In *L’Invasion*, she is the central character, bent on tidying up the place, encouraging the wife to leave, and the son to disappear in the basement with his piles of papers. Her enthusiasm for cleaning includes wishing for the State to expel refugees. She acts as a destructive vortex, ordering the world around her central armchair in such a fashion that everything and everyone is annihilated. The Mother clearly takes the control of everything, including the library and the writing desk in the fourth act: “Les meubles sont rangés, il n’y a plus de papiers nulle part ... Le fauteuil de la Mère se trouve maintenant tout à fait en avant, au milieu de la scène, et tourne face au public. La machine à écrire n’est plus à la même place et elle est recouverte d’une housse.”22 The Mother’s control of the disorderly invasion of creative literature coincides with the end of immigration in their State.23 She also controls the spoken words since she appears to be the keystone to the characters’ communications. Reporting her filtered version of Pierre’s words to Tradel, of Agnès’ words to Pierre, she successfully aborts communication, as well as her son’s quest of the creative words.

At first, Pierre retires into silence in order to understand the convention of language, questioning the ghostly meaning of the departed affixed to the page, and then in order to

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20 Ibid., 14: “A living theater, that is to say a theater where one’s gestures and stance, and one’s life have the right to be free from the pales of language and reach beyond psychological conventions, in order to gain deeper meaning.”

21 Ibid., 18: “Oui, ils parleront, chacun entendra ce que dira l’autre, mais l’autre ne dira pas ce qu’il aura à dire”; “Yes, they will talk, they will hear each other, but they will not say what they have to say.”

22 Adamov, *Théâtre I*, op. cit., 90: “The furniture is reorganized, there are no more papers anywhere ... The Mother’s armchair is now in the foreground, on the middle of the stage, and facing the public. The typewriter is moved aside and it is covered.”

23 Ibid., 91.
recover an authentic living language: “Pourquoi dit-on: ‘Il arrive?’ Qui est ce ‘il’, que veut-il de moi? Pourquoi dit-on ‘par’ terre, plutôt que ‘à’ ou ‘sur’? ... Ce qu’il me faut, ce n’est pas le sens des mots, c’est leur volume et leur corps mouvant.” While Pierre—“le dépositaire du message”—is left meditating in search of a living Verb, the Mother seems to maintain an order, which destroys the meaningful verb he is looking for. Everybody fails. Pierre gives up his quest when he tears up his friend’s manuscript and opts for a common life.

As for the Mother, she meets with a defeat reminiscent of Lili’s in La Parodie, as both women are conniving with authority figures. In each play, literal authority can be assimilated to the public, journalistic sphere, while in Tous contre tous (Everybody Against Everybody, 1951) for instance, radio shows represent the establishment and its language. Lili is in love with the Journalist who appears to be a policeman, in control of files describing people and their proven activities. In the same fashion as the Mother in L’Invasion, Lili is then supportive of the repressive and deadly law of language, despite the fact that she may fall prey to it herself. In fact, such feminine figures multiply in Adamov’s early theater. For example, in Tous contre tous, the Mother follows the political tide through radio announcements and propaganda, supporting the current powers whatever their nature, until she falls victim to them herself; the sister serves whatever master she encounters in Le Sens de la marche (The Direction of the Walk, 1953), while her brother attempts to rebel against the State as well as against his father; Les Retrouvailles (Gatherings, 1952) depict a male character manipulated over and over by women and returning endlessly to his initial departure point. All female roles here are equivalent, interchangeable, and over-determined in their effect.

The analysis of the early plays by Adamov points toward an original family drama, compulsively repeated, where a male child is destroyed by the combined exertions of the loved one (mother, sister or loved woman who loves another man), and of a seemingly hostile father figure. In L’Homme et l’enfant (The Man and the Child), Adamov actually describes a childhood terror fostered by his nurse and his sister: “Ma niania me racontait des histoires qui m’empêchaient de dormir, mais ma sœur me terrifiait encore davantage. C’est elle qui me persuada que ma chambre comprenait plusieurs zones, dont certaines maléfiques, où je ne devais a aucun prix me hasarder ... Si je transgressais ces

24 Ibid., 86: “What I need is not the meaning of words, it is their volume and their body in motion.” The first part is difficult to translate because it plays the use of impersonal expressions in French which are introduced by the neutral form of the third person singular as it is the case in English, but in French “it” is formally indistinguishable from “he” and it leads Pierre to ask "what does he/it want of me.” It also plays on conventional prepositions, all of which impart different meanings to a nominal expression (but they translate as “on the ground”, “onto the ground” or “on earth”).


interdictions, j'étais perdu. In a similar fashion, the theater of Adamov theater represents the established order as maintained by female characters' "homeland", turned into a destructive vortex which reaches everybody in due time, from the revolutionary militant to the defeatist, self-mutilating hero. While female characters try with uneven success to survive all regimes, only few characters, such as Darbon in Paolo Paoli (1957), actually manage to do so.

Whether the other characters resist or anticipate their unhappy end, they are unavoidably crushed, just as N. in La Parodie and the Mutilated in La Grande et la Petite Manœuvre (The Great and the Small Maneuver, 1950) are run over by cars. Not only does the theater of Adamov theater rest on paranoid scenarios, it issues from the playwright's avowed fear—a fear of the Father in Le Sens de la marche—a part of which he wants to unburden himself on the public: "J'ai voulu fonder le drame sur les réapparitions d'une figure posée d'emblée comme terrifiante, celle du Père." And with La Grande et la Petite Manœuvre, Adamov later explains that he wanted to communicate his terror to others. Language, watches, cars and radio waves concur toward socio-political control instead of delivering a sense of connection with the world an with one another.

C. A paranoid theater

Thus, it appears perfectly justifiable for Jean Duvignaud to describe the theater of Adamov as “un théâtre de la persécution”, when he contends that the playwright directs sadistic violence against the spectator in whom an awareness of his or her own abjection and fears are raised to levels of consciousness. Duvignaud concludes:

Théâtre de persécution? Mais quel grand créateur n'est un persécuté? Quel "concept" a remplacé celui du génie romantique sinon celui de la terreur? L'expérience qui domine l'œuvre de Dostoïevski, de Kafka, de Chaplin, de Strindberg—à qui Adamov doit beaucoup—est celle de l'homme traqué. De cette persécution, on ne se délivre guère qu'en persécutant, comme si l'acte créateur coïncidait avec un acte de violence sur la personne de ses contemporains. Ce qui rend si particulier cet effort dramatique, c'est qu'on y voit converger le principe de la souffrance et l'image de la mutilation: l'univers tragique d'Adamov est, à cause de cela, l'une des visionsterroristes de notre temps.

27 Adamov, L'Homme et l'enfant: souvenirs journal (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 15: “My nurse told me stories which prevented me from sleeping, but my sister terrified me even more. She persuaded me that my bedroom was composed of many areas, some of which were malevolent, and I should not go there at any cost ... If I were to transgress these prohibitions, I was lost.”

28 Adamov, “Introduction au Théâtre II” in Ici, op. cit., 21: “I wanted to lay the dramatic foundation upon the reappearances of a figure directly established as terrifying—the Father.”

29 Ibid., 20.


31 Ibid., 27: “A theater of the persecuted? But what great creator is not a persecuted person? What ‘concept’ replaced the romantic genius if not terror? The experience dominating literary production by Dostoïevsky, Kafka, Chaplin, Strindberg—to whom Adamov owes a lot—belongs to the hunted man. One is seldom free from this persecution except by exerting persecution, as if the creative act coincided with a violent act perpetrated on one’s
Just as a paranoid who feels aggrieved turns aggressive against his or her persecutors, Adamov turns against the public at large by the means of his published writings, insofar as it allows for his self-exposed fear to penetrate the reader, or the spectator. The victim turns executioner, and vice versa, alternatively, as it is most clearly the case in *Tous contre tous*. Language engages each individual against all at once, a reminder of the title of the autobiography by Adamov, *Je...Ils* (*I...They*). *L’Invasion* is accurately depicted by Duvignaud as the scenario of a house invaded by a writer’s papers. It makes use of a theme noted by Lacan as characteristic of paranoid delirium.

Other themes are reminiscent of clinical studies of paranoid disorders, such as the auditory hallucinations, signaled in the medical article entitled “Examination and Diagnosis.” It affects the Mutilated in *La Grande et la Petite Manœuvre*. It does not command him to destroy other people, however, rather, it destroys him by mutilating him a little more each time he hallucinates a voice.

Adamov reports that he once dreamt he was in a situation similar to the Mutilated: “Je savais que, d’un instant à l’autre, j’allais devoir la [une sœur] quitter pour obéir à un appel; quelque part, des Moniteurs m’attendaient pour m’imposer de terribles séances tenant à la fois de l’entraînement militaire et de la gymnastique, séances au terme desquelles je serai mutilé, puis détruit, je le savais.” It seems that Adamov was perfectly aware of his mental alienation—he took enough interest in psychoanalysis to translate Jung’s *The Ego and the Unconscious*—and he even went so far as to cultivate his disorder as a theatrical device, criticizing Brecht for neglecting this intimate aspect of alienation.

In his study of paranoid disorders, Bleuler notes that Kraeplin’s “dementia paranoides” involves no intellectual impairments except for “massive neologism.” It seems that it is a disorder, which affects Pierre in *L’Invasion*, when he starts lending deep hidden meaning to the commonly used prepositions for which he proposes new ones. And this quest is not absolutely foreign to Adamov’s search for a total concrete correspondence between the literal and the physical in his theater, a conception which contemporaries. What makes this dramatic effort so particular is that it brings together the suffering principle with the image of mutilation: consequently, Adamov’s tragic world one among the many terrorist visions of our time.”

35 Swanson suggests that paranoid patients may hear voices commanding them to kill (*Ibid.*, 34).
36 Adamov, “Introduction au ‘Théâtre II’”, *Ici, op. cit.*, 20: “I knew that at any moment I was going to have to leave her [a sister] in order to obey a call; somewhere, Monitors were expecting me to go through terrifying sessions reminiscent of military training and gymnastics, sessions at the end of which I would be mutilated and then destroyed, I knew it.”
he partly derives from Artaud: “Ce que je veux au théâtre et ce que j’ai tenté de réaliser dans ces pièces, c’est que la manifestation de ce contenu [caché, latente qui recèle les germes du drame] coïncide littéralement, **concètement, corporellement** avec le contenu lui-même.” Adamov seems to search for a total correspondence between meaning, and its literal and physical manifestations.

In his article “De l’aliénation à l’engagement ou le théâtre d’Arthur Adamov” (“From Alienation to Commitment or Arthur Adamov’s Theater”), Gaston R. Renaud traces Adamov’s desire to demystify conventional language from the playwright’s quest for a renewal of the sacred, as it has been analyzed by Martin Esslin. Adamov’s plays reflect language’s degradation and the state of anxiety it provokes in modern civilization, the incoherent state of the modern Verb, imparted by the disappearance of God. Linguistic disorder then springs from random referents: praying to God, as Adamov attempted to do for a while, becomes absurd in front of an empty sky. In the absence of the Verb language’s link to the Creation, or truth in writing, do not exist. All that remains is a codified, systematized language, which, like the machine central to Ping-Pong, does not function in a reliable consistent manner. “Calcul et hasard” characterize the game with a machine in which an additional part of chance comes from the fact that one of its pieces functions only half the time. Moreover it turns out that whether Arthur and Victor win or lose their match, they give money to the society, which produced the machine, and their illusion of control through their plays only leaves them open to the abuse by the Director who owns the games: “… l’appareil reste un objet produit par une société précise: la nôtre, et dans un but précis: gagner argent et prestige.” Yet, the characters are obsessed with the machine, and consider it as “l’Appareil Centre du Monde”. As old men, Arthur and Victor are finally aware of their possible escape from social production. They revert, but too late, to a game without rules, playing ping-pong without a net, and soon with their hands. This belated rebellion ends with Victor’s heart attack.

Analyzing Adamov’s “metamorphosis”, to use the playwright’s own terminology, from his absurdist theater to an historical one, Renaud notes a transformation in the

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39 Adamov, “Avertissement à ‘La Parodie’ et à ‘L’Invasion’” in *Ici*, *op. cit.*, 14: “What I want in theater is what I tried to produce in these plays, it is to make the manifestation of this content [hidden, latent, and concealing the seeds of the drama] coincide literally, **concretely, and physically** with the content itself.” Italics in the text.


42 Renaud, “De l’aliénation”, *op. cit.*, 366.


47 Adamov, “Introduction au ‘Théâtre II’”, *Ici*, *op. cit.*, 26: “Machines remain objects produced by specific societies: ours, and with a specific goal: to earn money and prestige.”

structure and the language of the later plays, starting precisely with Ping-Pong:

De plus, l'intrigue y est bien structurée; le langage reprend son sens normal: nous n'avons plus l'impression de la vague atmosphère du demi-rêve. Les personnages ne sont plus des archétypes, des personnifications d'attitudes humaines, mais des individus réels, comme vous et moi, car tous possèdent un certain degré de liberté qui leur donne la possibilité de changer le cours de leur existence, s'ils le voulaient vraiment.49

It is significant that Adamov no longer questions the link between language and reality, when he gives up a theater, which he finds apolitical because of its haphazard reference to the contemporary world. Adamov also pointed to his change of language in Ping-Pong: "C'est avec Le Ping-Pong que j'ai fait le ‘saut’ pour la première fois, je me suis senti libre, décontracté, ‘décorseté’, reprenant pied dans le monde, capable de nommer les choses par leur nom."50 Roger Blin thinks that Adamov’s change of attitude toward language corresponds to his marriage to a French woman. According to him, Adamov then lost his discomforting sense of detachment (due to his status of Armenian refugee) and finally felt grounded in France.51

One may wonder to what extent language viewed as inadequate to render reality, language as sheer fiction, and reality as a mere delirious verbal construct, may be termed subversive, or conservative if it remains severed from the objective world, indeed if as in some contemporary literary movements, there is no world outside the verbal sphere. Perhaps Adamov broke out of the linguistic prison, when he turned toward an “engaged” theater—accepting his social responsibility in the world. And yet some contend, as Renaud expeditiously does, that Adamov’s progress, far from being revolutionary, feeds a conservative, naturalistic tradition. In this light, Adamov’s renewal becomes a relapse into conventional theater, marked by a conventional use of language. Thus following the Brechtian footsteps in “engaged” theater, Adamov serves conservative aesthetics to achieve real social change... instead of replaying family drama on the stage of desire.

Adamov never ceased to adopt a subversive attitude toward an established order, searching for a “vrai langage” by opposition to a “langage truqué”.52 It also seems that by the very nature of his writings—theater necessarily relies on objectified embodied language—Adamov was seeking for literal referents all along. “La Parodie et L’Invasion ont été écrites pour la scène. On me dira que c’est le cas pour toutes les pièces de théâtre. Mais je crois que celles-ci, si elles ne connaissaient d’autre sort que la

49 Renaud, “De l’aliénation”, op. cit., 377: “Moreover, the plot is well structured; language recovers its normal meaning; we no longer have the impression of a vague half-dream atmosphere. The characters are no longer archetypes, personifications of human attitudes, they are real persons, like you and me, because they all possess a certain degree of liberty which grants them the possibility to change the flow of their existence, if they so desire.”
50 Adamov, “Pour finir” in Ici, op. cit., 173: “It is with Le Ping-Pong that I effected the ‘jump’ for the first time, I felt free, relaxed, ‘decorseted’, landing in the world, and able to name things by their name.”
52 Adamov, “Théâtre de société” in Ici, op. cit., 101: “true language” and “tricky language.”
The theater of Adamov affirms a need to break out of conventional language due to its lack of concreteness, for a new theatrical language engaged in the material world. It may be that Adamov simply replaced his preoccupation with the absence of metaphysics in language, with the potentials of material presence borne by words. He adopted this stance in order to break free from the prison of words, and that he did so as early as Ping-Pong, when he finally brought himself to “call things by their name”, a luxury in totalitarian regimes and perhaps in times of social upheavals. For him it appears that this overcoming of referential disorder was the necessary condition for his personal liberation, heralding the end of his paranoid as well as “avant-garde” theater.

This study also begs the question as to whether certain types of regimes foster linguistic and artistic “pathologies”—if contexts of war, genocide (1915-1917 for Armenians, compounded by the WWII holocaust), and absolutism, colonialism, necropolitics, or totalitarianism give rise to paranoid poetics.

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Adamov’s poetics changed radically from an “avant-garde” theater inspired by Strindberg, to an engaged” theater inspired by Tchekhov. He escapes the prison of a self-referential language of symbolical order, which he finds reactionary, when he dares "call things by their name" and name people as well. This last decision brings the police to his plays. Thus Adamov argues that a revolution through language is not to be approached by surrealist or symbolist means, nor even existentialist malaise; it demands the subtlety and the courage of realism.

Adamov’s poetics changed radically from an "avant-garde" theater inspired by Strindberg, to an "engaged" theater inspired by Tchekhov. Adamov argues that a revolution through language is not to be approached by surrealist or symbolist means, nor even existentialist malaise; it demands the subtlety of realism.
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