

The Absurd – a Constant of the Human Soul

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the absurd has two major understandings in the history of philosophical thinking: the logical plan and the theory of knowledge plan. This paper focuses on revealing at first some definitions and theoretical approaches towards the concept of absurd based on some religious and literary sources, and then defining the philosophical concept of the absurd as it appears in the works of some of the 20th century philosophers.

Keywords: *absurd, absurd theatre, the philosophy of the absurd, the absurd in literature, Romanian writers of absurd literature*

DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF THE ABSURD

The most shattering problem that has been a turmoil for the man ever since – beyond the great and the many questions, beyond negative answers or absence of the answer – is the awareness of the fact that he is born without consenting to it, he is given a life which is at the whim of incidents, a life whose only certainty is death. Thus, hanging between ‘to be’ or ‘not to be’, not finding a convincing answer, stuck in nonsense, possessed by a strong feeling of wantonness, the man remains with nothing but disappointment, rebellion, desperation, helplessness.

Just like any other form of artistic expression, the literature has been in a continuous transformation. The means of expression and the literary work substance itself modifies with time, in the rhythm of social and especially spiritual mutations of man, who – willy-nilly-is integrated in the challenges of society. He feels this society as being favourable or unfavourable, stressful and relaxing, acceptable and unbearable, according to his present mood or according to his own subjectivity, accepting it and rejecting it at the same time.

After the fall into sin, the man was banished from “The sweet Paradise and sound peace/... outside in the storm” (Arghezi 1980, 149). Exiled in the worldly jungle, the man is first preoccupied not to assure one's sustenance but with the new human relations and mostly with solving the greatest mystery of life: death. “So, the man began to make history and history began to make

him, to captivate him, to determine and transform him from a happy person into a lonely, indignant, resigned, scared, anxious one, in one word – an unfortunate one"(Panțel-Cenușer 2002, 7).

Returning to biblical times, we find the first alarm quite in the essential book of Christianity, which draws attention on human life's wantonness. With an extraordinary power of synthesis, The Ecclesiastes sends the final message vanity and wantonness of all human acts: "As he came naked from his mother's womb, from which he came, he goes back and he cannot grab anything of all his work." Man back then – like the one now and the one ever – is thrown into the earthly jungle, where he loses his way, unable to control his existence, being obsessed with the scarcity of his days: "The whole body ages like a coat, as to dye is since forever. As the leafs which turn green a bushy tree, some falling, others rising, so is the fruit of body and blood: one dies and other is born. (Ecclesiastes 14:17-19)

From ancient times until today, literature has not done anything else than expressing man as a presence of his epoch, wearing at the same time the sign of eternity he was endowed with at creation. Writers of all times have illustrated in their works problems people of their epoch were facing with. This way, the absurd as considerable aesthetic structure becomes an important theme for the western culture of past century's latest decades. But symptoms of absurd have been manifesting since the mid-twentieth century.

The tragedy of contemporary man has no longer the same essence as the ancient tragedy. True modern tragedy is the one in which the clash between man and all that it is hostile to him becomes alive. To Sartre, Camus, Eugen Ionescu and Beckett – all of them part of "the last vanguard" – the modern tragedy refuses these simple categories and they have in view the dialectic stages of ascension and collapse, faith and denial, elevation and apostasy. Therefore, here is one of modern tragic sources: not only in the outside confrontation between man and destiny, between man and the hostile, but in his very greatness and downfall. The thing that emphasizes his tragedy is the fact that these external circumstances highlight shadows, hostilities, human soul's slag: fear, cowardice, nothingness, vanity and other spiritual traits that erupt when man can not face anymore the pressure of external forces. From this perspective the absurd is only a resultant of the modern age which generates new tragic conflicts.

As Nicolae Balota says (1971) – and after him all the literary critics who have dealt with this problem – "there is a connection between literary creation and philosophical reflection, especially when talking about the literature of the absurd. The feeling of absurd expresses crisis with multiple facets: social and existential, crisis of language, of communication. Therefore, the absurd becomes a feature of the western world and culture, a symptom of a "mal du siècle".

Literature does not make the world, but expresses it. Every era has had its different realities that are always in relationship with man. From Sofocle to Eugen Ionescu, from Urmuz to Ivanceanu, each designer has responded in a certain way to the realities of his time. The idea is expressed as clear as possible by Eugen Ionescu, a brilliant representative of the theatre of the absurd, in the volume "Notes and contra-notes": "The theatre is clearly a reflection of the anxiety of our times. Nothing could stop it to be also the expression of all times' anxieties... these anxieties are expressed better, they are more authentic, more complex, deeper when they are carried by imaginative power... the more contradictory a testimony is, the more true it is" (Ionescu 1992, 143)

Authors themselves are against their enrolling in the current of the absurd. Beckett and Adamov vehemently reject the epithet "absurd" and Eugen Ionescu considers in "Notes and counter-notes" that absurd is a simple word in fashion, which will disappear in the near future because it expresses a state too vague and it is unable to include all the features of this type of literature. A resultant of modern era is also the abolition of borders between different aesthetic categories, action foreseen by Urmuz's prose and defined by Eugen Ionescu: "Therefore, their creations are called tragic comedies, psychodramas or tragic farces" (Munteanu 1971, 13).

According to "The Dictionary of Literary Terms", the term of absurd comes from French *absurde*,

Latin *absurdus* and it means *disturbing, meaningless*. In common language absurd means everything that exceeds the common meaning, in total opposition to the term absurd is met both in philosophy and literature, in reporting individual's inability to find a way of life, of human existence's laws, by using artistic means totally different from classical rules of that genre. Absurd is defined by the irrationality and pessimistic view of the world. The literature of the absurd denies the rational nature, it contradicts logical thinking, it rejects the laws of nature and society, proclaiming the illogical, the aberrant, the incomprehensible of the existence. The idea of absurd, the native living of the absurd, the intuition or the feeling of the absurd in human existence proceed its literary representation. The category of the *absurd* received some consistency in the works of Existentialist philosophers like Kirkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus. For the later ones the absurd defines the human inability to find a way of life, to make an agreement between individuals and society with its rules. The literature of the absurd tries to express the drama of a man trapped in an incomprehensible world and inevitably hostile to individual values.

The author of the best-known study about the theatre of the absurd, Martin Esslin, takes the view that, though its aesthetic structure is defined in our century, absurdity would characterize even ancient traditions, finding its roots in the ancient myth and tragedy. Other experts find correspondences of the absurd in the pyramid texts, in the Oriental religion or Apocalypse. Biblical messages abound in illogical, spooky, unacceptable forms. Eugen Ionescu, for example, signals a match between "The End of The Game" by Beckett and The Book of Job.

Albert Camus says about the absurd work in the study "The Myth of Sisyphus" that "it illustrates reasoning giving up its prestige and it resigns to remain only the intelligence that puts appearances in works and covers with pictures something that is not understood" (Camus 2002, 12). Therefore, the literature of the absurd is often symbolic, like Franz Kafka's and Eugen Ionescu's works. Although this type of literature has distant roots (in baroque and grotesque styles), it will gain a major aesthetic status only in the 20th century. Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, J.P. Sartre and most of the playwrights of the '60s (Eugen Ionescu, S. Beckett, F. Arrabal etc) have asserted themselves in the literature of the absurd.

In the Romanian culture the first author that promoted the absurd was Urmuz (D. Demetrescu-Buzau) followed by young writers from the '30s (Grigore Cugler, F. Bunea-Fox, Ion Calugaru, Jaques G. Costin, Tascu Gheorghiu, H. Bonciu, Eugen Ionescu, V.V. Martinescu, T. Iliescu) . The absurd was continued then, only in the seventh decade of last century in D. Tepeneag's and V. Ivanceanu's works.

The literature of the absurd cannot be removed from the socio-political and cultural context. It is certain that the idea of absurd preceded his literary representation. There is an original experience of the absurd, an intuition, a feeling, an idea of the absurd which proceed its literary representation.

The absurd becomes a dominant theme of Western art from the middle of last century, manifested both in Essays and philosophy and in theatre and publishing. We can even speak of a symptomatology of the absurd in the Western culture from the mid 20th century.

Concerning the literature of the absurd, we believe that there is a close link between the literary creation and philosophical reflection. Although there is not a literary manifestation, a literary school of the absurd, there is a significant aesthetic structure for a literature of the absurd. The sense of the absurd expresses a crisis with multiple facets: social and existential, a crisis of language and communications.

1. THE PHILOSOPHIC-LOGIC ABSURD

The concept of the absurd has two major understandings in the history of philosophical thinking: the logical plan and the theory of knowledge plan. On the logical level absurdity means everything that is contrary to logical rules. From this perspective, the absurd is used on the logical plan by the philosophers Aristotle and Bacon in „reasoning by means of the absurd“ (proof by reduction to absurdity or nonsense), to demonstrate its truth by falsehood contrary. Characteristic to philosophy, absurd reasoning is found in the theatre of the absurd, especially in Eugene Ionesco's works, writer who „breaks down the building of the logic by means of logic“ (Balotă 1971, 16).

Proclaimed by the 20th century's writers, who had been on the footsteps of philosophy (Miguel de Unamuno, Ortega Y Gasset, Eugenio d'Ors), the absurd represents the bankruptcy of reasoning. There have been some similarities uncovered between the literature of the absurd and the old Romanticism which exalt the passion against reasoning. Writers such as Schelling, Schlegel, Novalis or Hartmann deny the general truth proclaiming the subjective truth expression under the form of certain messages.

On the knowledge theory level, the absurd gains an epistemological and metaphysical understanding within the philosophical irrationality frame which sustains the impossibility of rational knowledge and existence of the universe. Representatives of the irrational trend, such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bergson, followed by the writers of the absurd and the modern existentialist will come against the idea of a rational universe.

Though there is no philosophical absurd school, the parents of the absurd spirituality trend are considered to be J. P. Sartre and Albert Camus-the first one being an existentialist philosopher and the second one being a thinker and a writer. Thus, the concept of the absurd becomes a topic to be thought of within existentialist philosophy.

A first mention of the absurd concept within the existentialist philosophy is the paradox- a term used by Soeren Kierkegaard to name a contradictory words joint. According to Kierkegaard's opinion there are aesthetic paradoxes and religious ones as well. The synonym surrounding of the aesthetic paradox is represented by the pathetic and the comic dimensions. Regarding the religious paradoxes, Kierkegaard's advice was that the reasoning should obey the faith: „Credo, quia absurdum“ (I do believe even it is nonsense). In the German philosopher's mind both the object and the act of faith are absurd. The absurd faith comes out of the rations' desperation.

The irrational dimension of the absurd and a clear cut feeling of the absurd are systematically dealt with within the French existentialism trend in J.P Sartre's work (The Being and the Nothingness) and in Albert Camus' essay-like work "The Myth of Sisyphus".

Jean Paul Sartre reflects upon the social crisis and reaches the conclusion that the world is absurd. Sartre rebels against the absurdity of this world claiming that man has the power to drag himself out of this chaos, to outcome it, to give chaos a meaning. According to the French philosopher the world "itself" is absurd and this is why the human consciousness - "for oneself"- intervenes. This projects itself upon the external reality and actions upon it via the nothingness dimension, which is the detachment action done by human consciousness. Thus, Sartre notices a double absurdity: one refers to a world which has not received the significance from the human consciousness and the other one refers to a consciousness that does not exert its function. As a consequence, the absurd can only be overcome through the world-man communication, a communication between consciousness and the objects of the consciousness. A non -communication between consciousness and the world of the objects represents the third source of the absurd, a precipice between reasoning and reality.

An important contribution in studying the absurd concept -on a philosophic level- was made by Albert Camus, who was interested in the theoretical issues of the absurd. He managed to describe the state of the absurd.

All the experts in Camus have established two stages in the writer's work. In the first one the author ascertains the absurd of the existence and he also assumes it. This is the period in which the individual rebellion reflex makes its presence strongly felt. The second period is essentially influenced by the Second World War and by the Resistance; the "metaphysical rebellion", designed to be an indissoluble relation with a human community, becomes the value that the affective solidarity establishes upon and it is professed in the spirit of a "hopeless heroism", of a "secular holiness".

The texts of the "Myth of Sisyphus" are poetic-philosophical essays in nature, and the whole volume is in fact a resumption and a more organized development of the ideas from "The Wedding" volume, which sets in a more explicit way a certain intellectual and emotional attitude. It is all about those „records“ that reveal the spirit without the need for a logical argument and those old truths, which the author says in "The Summer in Algiers" that are „truths which the hand can reach“. For Camus the first of these obvious truths is the existence of the world, its value as an existential given that can not be ignored. This world, feverishly known to Camus, is an „unbearable beauty“ and „not-human“, a beauty in the middle of which „people die though“. But the man must believe in it, he should not elude anything, for out of this world full of beauty, there is no salvation.

Camus was concerned about the theoretical aspects of the absurd. He was seeking to capture its essential determinations. He fails but only to describe the absurd, thus, actually giving us the state of the absurd which stems from the individual awareness in relation to one's unfortunate circumstances, of „a being thrown into the world“ meant for nothingness. Having as a starting point the human alienation awareness Camus describes the feeling of absurd as being a „divorce“ between „man and his life, between the actor and his setting“ (Camus 2001, 115). This feeling is only the beginning. The next is the alienation, which Camus identified with the absurd „this opacity and the alienation of the world belong to the absurd“ (Camus 2001, 122).

It may be noted that in Camus' works the absurd does not appear as a clearly defined concept. This leads to a series of identifications between the absurd and alienation, between the absurd and „nausea“, absurd and „savage“. The author himself attempts to make a delineation of "the notion of absurd" from the „sense of the absurd“, though the first term is based on the second.

Stating his position as being opposed to that of the irrational thinkers', Camus affirms that „the world is not absurd“, but „all you can say is that the world in itself is not rational, the confrontation between this irrational and this boundless desire for clarity - , whose call echoes in the depths of the man- is absurd.

The absurd involved the man as well as the world“ (Camus 2001, 127). In Camus' view the irrational is different from the absurd: the irrational is "the reasoning that becomes dark and frees itself by denying the issue", while the absurd is "the lucid reasoning which establishes its limits" (Camus 2001, 143). From the absurd concept as a "feeling „of anxiety and fear, awareness of one's unfortunate existential situation, Camus presents the absurd as a "lucidity „of the reasoning which "finds its limits", as a constant tension between man and world , between the individual's inability and the „absurd walls“ of the world's „irrational silence“. The same idea , the man's inability to solve the great contradiction of one's existence is underlined by Emil Cioran, too: „The mixture of disease and vitality strangely turns up side down the natural components in such a way that one finds oneself on no land, but on all of them“. Always trying to control death, so that he won't be surprised by it, the Romanian thinker is always in a nothingness drill like state, in some sort of exercise of elimination training. „Each and every moment is lost in eternity. A <see you soon> feeling towards nothingness is keeping an eye on you at the breath crossroad with the world. Death is here and you can not stay alive in it -impossible elimination of the evil" (apud Popa 2005, 17).

There is no possible escape out of this unfortunate alternative, and the absurd man „can only exhaust everything and exhaust oneself“, that is to live the absurd at its utmost intensity, becoming exhausted with it. Suicide, as a possible escape from the absurd, is not a real solution because it is more important to live and think in spite of these lacerations, this way one gets to defy the absurd

ultimately. Camus detaches the consequences of the individual's life experience in the absurd: revolt, freedom and passion. Later on, Camus abandons the issue concerning the absurd and he tries to move away from his previous pessimistic concepts by postulating the rebellion as a way to overcome the absurd.

Camus is perhaps the thinker who best understood the essence of the absurd seen as the problem of the man who has discovered the absurd as a rapport between the existence meaning and nonsense. Thus, the "absurd hero is doomed to die and live at the same time. The theatre of the absurd heroes are not cheerful or sad, they are not ill and nevertheless they are not healthy, they can barely give a faint smile or hardly whine, they are rejected by life and by death -as living style, this is all they have got left" (Popa 2005, 24).

Facing this reality, one has nothing to do but to choose between the sickness feeling mentioned by Sartre or the Shakespearian question "to be or not to be", and this places one into a dramatic tension regarding a choice. The answer postulated by Camus is the rebellion which attracts action and the last one, according to the French thinkers, cancels the feeling of the absurd. As a consequence, we "have to imagine Sisyphus is happy" as assuming his existence as something related to his own consciousness, he has discovered he has as choice.

2. THE ALIENATED HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

Thoroughly analysing the above mentioned theories one can draw a portrait of the absurd hero. He is a rebel and adventure is his destiny: the political adventure (Malraux), the sexual-erotic one (D.H Lawrence) or the free of charge one (A. Gide).

Sartre's thesis "the man is the existence through which the nothingness comes into the world" expresses the essence of Existentialism. This means that one, as a being doomed to seclusion, is on one hand an object belonging to the material world due to one's body (a fact). On the other hand, due to one's consciousness man belongs to nothingness as from birth he is destined to death and everything he accomplishes is done towards the virtue of the nothingness. Thus, man is thrown into the world being incapable of deciding over the course of his life, which is nonsense, while his consciousness forces him to take notice of his helplessness in a universe which is hostile to his growth and moreover, hostile to the full manifestations of the human potencies. In 'The Being and the Nothingness' Jean Paul Sartre thinks of the alienation as a result of a *human project* choice started at birth. So, the man can become whatever he wants regardless of the factual, historical circumstances of his growth.

According to Existentialism "in their essence, individuals are <liberties> in action, singular existences which alienate in an existential and structural way their body, and their consciousness, which comes out of nothingness and is fated to nothingness" (Popa 2005, 11).

Heidegger and Jaspers are not preoccupied with the analysis of the absurd, but their conception about the existence - generally speaking- and the human existence- in particular- brings its contribution in establishing a certain climate regarding the study of the contemporary human condition. Thus, by introducing their concepts of *nothingness*, *limit situation*, *choice*, *freedom* and especially the significance attached to these concepts, these philosophers perceive man and the material reality in negative terms. They also maintain that there is a ceaseless tension and a mutual denial between the two of them.

The Existing one (the human being) has for Heidegger an uncertain state, a state set between existence and non-existence. This man's ambiguous and unhappy state -existence and non-existence- in the expectation of death, generates the absurd as a tension, a "divorce", a situation

that cannot be solved up by reasoning as this cannot operate in a sphere of absolute denial.

To Jaspers, the human existence is conditioned by the act of choosing. Just like Heidegger's case, the human being has an ambiguous status: on one hand, man belongs to the world and on the other hand, man is pure subjectivity being able to make choices and determine its own existence. But the choice has no grounds, it's irrational: it is done outside any sort of knowledge. Jaspers postulates that life experience is the modality by which the individual gets into contact with the Transcendence, with God. This point of view sets him on the Religious Existentialism position.

To Camus, the alienated man prototype is the "absurd hero", who significantly is presented in the contemporary literature. This type of hero has given up all the collective hopes and lacks a spiritual centre. His prototype is to be found in Sisyphus – the man of the solitary effort, helplessness and rebellious in the same time. In Camus' mind, some other types of absurd heroes are Don Juan, The Comedian, The Conqueror. As the absurd hero does not recognize any ethical value, the creator of the absurd does not recognize any aesthetic value. He creates for nothing; he is "The Great Mime" (Albert Camus) as he mimes reality hidden by the masque of the absurd. Camus sees in Kafka a typical creator of the absurd and Nicolae Balotă sees in this writer a pioneer of the "absurd ones" in the 20th century (Balotă 1971, 35).

Finding oneself in front of this existential deadlock, man remains with nothing but creation, the most appealing alternative of human protection strategy against the nothingness, against one's eradication from the memory of the history. Be it the science-fiction creation or the artistic-cultural one, the creative act is the basis of relation with the human or physical nature. It is the means by which the human being is discovered as being not only a unit exposed to the tyranny of the biology and inexorable disappearance.

Creation is the action by which man -temporarily forgetting about ones' existential ending-creates meanings for himself, makes his way in life. Denying the nonsense, man can aspire towards identity and uniqueness. "Being aware of the existential absurd and the temptation of creating meanings is perhaps the climax of human dignity [...] trapped in a game in which the absurd comes across hope, the nonsense comes across reasoning, the man realises that existence has been a lie and truth at the same time and in spite of this confusion, man keeps on living and creating. If we have to imagine Sisyphus happy for having transformed a wantonness, an absurd gesture in a meaningful thing, then we all have to consider ourselves happy. Everyone is on its own, meaning each of us has to mime the meaning within a completely absurd frame" (Popa 2005, 36-37).

Caught in a game of the absurd, exposed to the hazard, desperate that birth and death take place outside his own will, man has nothing left but creation, so that he could temporarily evade these concentric circles game in a suspended moment in his absurd journey between "to be" or "not to be".

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