Re-Thinking Character in the Theatre of the Absurd
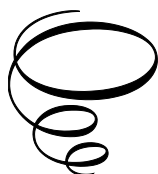
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By

Carmen Dominte

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Defined as being against reason or common sense, clearly false or foolish, the word *absurd* receives other important connotations when placed in the literary field. According to Martin Esslin, in common usage, the term *absurd* may simply mean ridiculous or senseless, but when it became the concept that characterized so many literary masterpieces, it changed its basic function from a common word to an aesthetic label for a literary movement. Unlike other literary currents, there was not a unitary literary current that could include the literary creations considered absurdist.[1] Paradoxically, not the writers nor the theoreticians and philosophers agreed to the use of this term in relation to their works. Although there is no aesthetic that may concern literary works and manifestations, it is impossible to deny the philosophical implications and reflections that can be identified in the absurdist literature.

European philosophy was greatly affected by all the philosophical changes that took place at the turn of the twentieth century, among which irrationalism was the most important. The rejection of many traditional values led to new experiences based on the lack of reason.[2] The *absurd* became possible the moment the intellectual adventure of the twentieth century turned its attention away from traditional reason. In doing so, the absurd was just an aspect that could be easily associated with a reality whose meaning had been lost (Albérès, 1950: 241). Regarded as an artistic expression of a new manner of thinking as well as of a new way of existence, the literature of the absurd was built on the tendency to minimize rational certainties, depreciate values, and distort the human consciousness. The process of decomposing axiological consciousness led to certain effects, among which the most important is distorting any sense of reality, which,

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[1] Some of the writers refer to an absurdist literary movement, others to a brand or fashion mainly characterized as absurd.
[2] The same lack of reason had already generated other major cultural crises throughout history, such as the crisis of the ancient culture as well as the crisis that marked the end of the medieval culture.

in turn, generated the loss of any sense concerning human existence. Plunged into a chaotic universe, impossible to comprehend, people had to face alienation in all aspects.

Moreover, since it became impossible to rely on their individuality or an authentic cultural, philosophical or spiritual background, people could not adjust to this new reality, nor could they understand and explain what exactly was happening to them. In fact, despite the absurd aspect, what was happening was that they did not know what was really happening. With no future perspective, human existence becomes meaningless and absurd[3]. The entire tendency to distort not only the rational laws and certainties but also the cultural and spiritual values was transposed into a major literary theme employed by most representatives of the literature of the absurd. In fact, what really set absurdist literature apart from other avant-garde literary movements is the fact that despite flourishing briefly, the avant-garde movements, such as futurism, expressionism, Dadaism, and constructivism, were always on the outside of the mainstream in both literature and theatre. In contrast, the literature of the absurd, and particularly the theatre of the absurd, became mainstream for a decade or so (*Ibidem:* 124).

Besides its characteristics as an artistic movement and genre, absurdist literature also represents the literary works of individual writers that may be regarded as a homogeneous group. Absurdist literature explores the multiple relationships established between the sentiment of the absurd and the various existential experiences that people find themselves involved in. Regarded as a phenomenon of crisis, absurdist literature expressed people's confrontations with an absurd world and an absurd existence. Each literary expression, either in a narrative manner, as in Franz Kafka's, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's, Max Frisch's, Albert Camus', Jean Paul Sartre's, Samuel Beckett's, Boris Vian's, Kurt Vonnegut's, and Julio Cortázar's novels and short stories, or a dramatic and theatrical manner, as in Éugene Ionesco's, Samuel Beckett's, Jean Paul Sartre's, Albert Camus', Arthur Adamov's, Harold Pinter's, Edward Albee's, Jean Genet's, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's, Max Frisch's, Fernando Arrabal's, and Boris Vian's plays, represents an individual contribution to the essence of this type of literature.

The same concerns regarding a meaningless human existence, the absence of human values and ideals, and the irrational human condition represented a major theme in many literary works. Some writers explore all

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[3] The same lack of sense concerning human existence was affirmed not only by Éugene Ionesco but also by Martin Esslin, who, referring to the Theatre of Absurd, admitted the impossibility to explain and comprehend the absurd world (Esslin, 1969: 9).

these aspects in a rational manner based on logic reasoning[4], as in Camus', Sartre's, Giraudoux's, Anouilh's, and Salacrou's literary works, while other writers, including Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Adamov, Pinter, Arrabal, and Albee, prefer to abandon the rational instruments of discursive thinking in their literary approach to the same aspects. Within absurdist literature, the theatre of the absurd represents a step forward in dealing with a common theme. In doing so, it intends to establish a unity between the very new premises and their literary expressions. Thus, the literary works belonging specifically to the theatre of the absurd were no longer interested in discussing the absurdity of human condition but aimed instead to reveal it. The manner of exploiting such a theme used by the representatives of the theatre of the absurd is distinct from the more lyrical and poetical manner preferred by playwrights, among whom should be mentioned Michel de Gelderode, Jacques Audiberti, Georges Nerveux, Georges Schehadé, Henri Pichette, and Jean Vauthier, all representatives of the French literary movement known as the poetic avant-garde.

Despite their similar attitude to the theatrical unity of situations, to imaginary theatrical conflict as well as its development, the authors belonging to the poetic avant-garde have a different way of dealing with more extreme conflicts, such as violence and the grotesque, preferring a more lyrical and poetical aspect to their texts. At the same time, their language is based on certain patterns of verbal associations meant to render more a poem than a play. On the contrary, the playwrights in the theatre of the absurd make use of language in a more objective way since what happens on stage, many times, transcends what is said on stage, or, even more, what is said on stage does not in fact mean anything at all. Thus, it could be stated that the literary works in the theatre of the absurd take between a rational and a lyrical approach to the same themes.

The present analysis discusses the major absurdist literary works. It considers not only the texts that employ the tools of discursive rational thinking, as in Camus' or Sartre's plays, but also the texts that reject such tools, aiming to point out the necessity of a gradual semiotic-mathematical implication, from the common to the abstract, in approaching this type of

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[4] When writing about the absence of any illusion and the lack of any rational explanation for the contemporary world, Albert Camus used a discursive manner for his philosophical essays and his novels and plays. Similarly, Jean Paul Sartre connects his philosophical ideas with the literary representations by employing specific characters that are capable of revealing the philosophical background.

literature[5]. Such an examination of these texts dwells on the specificity of the plays included in the theatre of the absurd as true possibilities of more and more abstract semiotic-mathematical investigations. To highlight their specific inherent characteristics, the analysis uses the same instruments for both types of texts and noticing the differences. The examination focuses on the absurdist character and the changes determined by the manner of dealing with the literary theme of the absurd. The theme of the absurdity of existence is approached either through a logically constructed reasoning or by employing avant-garde dramatic techniques. Either way, these texts reveal metaphysical anguish at the human experience of the absurdity of life.[6] Moreover, the plays considered absurdist not only abandon rational and discursive thinking and devices but also lack any traditional dramatic plot, development, characterization, and suspense, relying only on scenes reflecting dreams or nightmares, highlighting the devaluation of language expressed through void dialogues (Esslin, 1964: 7-8).

   The present approach of the absurdist character focuses on both types of theatre, existentialist and absurd, according to Martin Esslin's terminology. While the existentialist plays mainly concentrate on delivering stories, introducing and discussing ideas, sometimes even investigating and solving problems of human existence, the theatre of the absurd[7] focuses more on revealing what is essentially the sense of being, aiming to explore inner states of consciousness. The absurdist character is perceived as engaged in their existence, aiming to find a sense or meaning for it. Relying on their self-knowledge, such characters are able to build up a whole system of personal values that is opposed to the absurd system of the world. Unfortunately, the old values are replaced by new ones, and the characters constantly adjust their system. Rejected by a world that cannot be understood, the heroes experience alienation as a form of existence. In their attempt to find a reason for the absurd world they inhabit, the characters

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[5] This semiotic-mathematical approach to the absurdist literature takes into consideration texts belonging to the theatre of the absurd as well as texts that are usually not referred to as appertaining to this kind of theatre but explore the same themes in a specific manner based mainly on reason.

[6] The two approaches of the same theme are rendered by Martin Esslin in the following explanation, stating that Sartre and Camus expressed the new content of the old convention while the texts belonging to the theatre of the absurd went a step forward in their attempt to achieve unity between their basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed (Esslin, 1964: 6).

[7] In this respect, although the theatre of the absurd seems to be an existentialist theatre because it expresses a direct perception of a mode of being above all abstract considerations, it still delivers this perception by disregarding most dramatic conventions.

discover the absurdity of their own existence. Although the heroes try desperately to communicate, no one comprehends. Words are only spoken to prove their existence. Exploring their consciousness, absurdist heroes face a void. Since these characters belong to dramatic texts, their experiences are meant to take shape on stage. The characters' evolution is not based only on the dialogues they are involved in or the monologues they deliver but also on their acts, gestures, attitudes, mimics, and interactions with the other characters that the actors have to embody. In other words, the present analysis takes into consideration, besides the characters' textual evolution, the representation on stage of the embodiments that more or less correspond to the authors' indications.

Based on an up-to-date reading from a semiotic and structuralist perspective, the present examination aims to extend the basic theoretical perspective to a mathematical approach that may cover the analysis of the character as a whole, meaning as a core element of both the dramatic text and the stage representation. This exploration of absurdist character intends first to contextualize it within the general frame of the absurdist cultural movement and literature by stating the concept of the absurd from a philosophical and logical perspective, and then giving a short insight into existentialism as the basic philosophical current that highly influenced absurdist literature. To delve deeper into the character, the present approach plans to bridge two perspectives – the semiotic-structuralist and the mathematical. To accomplish this purpose, it is necessary to relate the present semiotic-structuralist aspect of the analysis to the previous studies regarding the examination of the character and to specify the mathematical interventions in this kind of analysis.

The very starting point of both the semiotic-structuralist and mathematical insights into the analysis of the absurdist character is the *dramatic situation*. Viewed not only as a microcosm built on the *dramatic actions* and characters performing on stage in front of an audience but also as a macrocosm representing the universe of the play implied by and interacting with the microcosm of the same play, the *dramatic situation* may be defined as the structural diagram of a play drawn in a certain moment of the *dramatic action* by a system of *dramatic forces* that determine the development of the whole performance. These *dramatic situations* are further organized and combined so that they may generate the specific dramatic dynamics of the play they belong to. Approaching the *dramatic situation* from a semiotic-structuralist perspective, it will be necessary to investigate the absurdist character on the dramatic as well as on the paradigmatic levels, which are further related to the mathematical perspective used to explore character on the scenic level. The intended

algebra will be based on both perspectives but focuses mainly on the character of the theatre of the absurd and analyses the specificity of such characters on a scenic level, being involved in *scenic relations, configurations* and *confrontations*, on a dramatic level, as part of the *dramatic situations*, employing certain *dramatic functions* for achieving a purpose, and on a paradigmatic level, being engaged in *paradigmatic situations* based on specific *paradigmatic functions*. The core element for all three levels – scenic, dramatic and paradigmatic – is represented by the character. Thus, the mathematical perspective using algebraic instruments, such as the set of elements and the numeric strings, will be related to the semiotic-structuralist perspective involved in the investigation of the character engaged in certain dramatic situations, using the dramatic functions of the Subject, the Object, the Arbitrator, the Receiver, the Adversary, and the accomplice to develop the dramatic action. Both perspectives are necessary for delving into the paradigmatic level. The interconnection of the three levels of investigation facilitates the possibility of a geometrical approach on character.

Taking after Euclidean geometry and Paul Ginestier's vision of the geometrical arrangements of dramatic relations, the structure of a play may be outlined as a simple or complex geometrical figure. Aiming to visualize the whole set of dramatic relations, the position of the character as well as the specific types of engagements that the character(s) take part in can determine certain geometrical configurations. [8] Starting from Paul Ginestier's viewpoint that established the categories of open, semi-opened or semi-closed, and closed geometries, the architectonic cohesion among the characters of a play will be examined to design certain geometrical representations. Using Paul Ginestier's first and second rank geometries, the dramatic relationships belonging to the scenic level may be geometrically configured to figures corresponding to a triangle or square. Since the geometrical approach takes into consideration the other perspectives, meaning the dramatic and the paradigmatic, any two-dimensional representation will be extended to a three-dimensional configuration. Even more, according to the evolution of the dramatic action, the basic geometrical figures are expected to be reconfigured into new and more complex figures specifically for the theatre of the absurd.

Knowing that any traditional play is destined not only to be read but also performed on stage, it is imperative these texts contain elements that state their dramatic character. Taking into consideration Steen Jensen's theory, a

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[8] The geometrical perspective is intended to focus on the configuration and evolution of the groups of characters based on their interactions.

play may be regarded on two simultaneous levels – the textual, which is a compound of the successive units of cues and régie, and the stage level, which is made of the discontinuous units of character and set. All four units, defined as the minimal units of any dramatic work, are organized into dramatic situations resulting from the division of the textual plane into sequences. The specific possibilities of organizing the dramatic situations in a play determine certain configurations that further generate the coherent structure of that play. When referring to the plays of the theatre of the absurd, such a theoretical perspective needs further adjustments. A traditional play usually contains clear delimitations between the textual level and the stage level. Absurdist plays deliver all the information in bulk so that certain aspects regarding the entire fictional world or the other characters' actions can be extracted not only at the beginning of the scenes and acts but also throughout the play. Since they lack a clear distinction between the main and the side text, these plays are capable of reversing the traditional focalization from the main text to the side text, and sometimes even eliminating the main text, whose functions are taken over by the other units of the side text. This facilitates rethinking the functions of the four dramatic units as well as rearranging the relationships established among these units.

By changing the focalization of a play as a dramatic text to a play as a performance-oriented text, the absurdist play may be viewed as set of functions which, based on a mathematical approach, may lead to the analogy of the text as a whole and the abstract automata. According to this perspective, the play and its context constitute the input while the performance as the expression of the dramatic text stands for the output. This approach may become capable of transposing the focalization from the character as a central sign of a play to the words as central signs belonging to both the dramatic text and the performance text. Further on, the model of relations developed among the dramatic units can be reconfigured.

At this point, the new model is expected to be used as an instrument of analysis for the performance text as a unitary whole, taking the mathematical approach into the area of performance studies. The intention of the present volume is to relate the semiotic-structuralist perspective with the mathematical perspective[9] in order not only to explore the characters of

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[9] The relationship between the semiotic-structuralist perspective and the mathematical perspective is based on an overview regarding the major studies on theatre. Outlined as a synthesis, such a relationship summarizes the main ideas provided by the semiotic-structuralist approach and explored further. Starting from the basic idea that a play may be considered an act of communication and the characters function as transmitters of certain messages, the present volume intends

the plays belonging to the theatre of the absurd but also to provide specific tools of investigation. Since these texts include three levels of dramatic evolution and thus of analysis, insight into the world of absurdist characters needs to consider such complex material and deliver instruments that fully correspond to this kind of investigation.

The process of rethinking character in the theatre of the absurd starts from a wider perspective that will first set the basic coordinates of the concept of the absurd and the main influences of existentialist philosophy on absurdist literature in general. The second step will specify the major characteristics of the theatre of the absurd. The next steps are viewed as stages of investigation concerning absurdist character, aiming to develop a specific algebra as well as a specific geometry of the theatre of the absurd, having this type of protagonist as the core element. Throughout the research, traditional focalization on character as a major dramatic unit of a dramatic work will be discussed and adapted to new types of investigation.

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to extend the approach towards the field of mathematics. According to the mathematical approach, each character's position, purpose and interaction with other characters, objects, ideas, concepts, personal identities, voices, etc. may be interpreted in mathematical terms.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONCEPT OF THE ABSURD

Before any literary movement could be qualified in relation to the absurd, theoretical thinking was problematized by the concept. Although there had been experiences and feelings that intuited it, the idea of the absurd preceded its literary representation. Throughout its history, philosophical thinking had invested the concept of the absurd with two constant meanings – the first one governed by logic and the second one by knowledge and metaphysics. The first sense stands for anything opposed to logical thinking. Nevertheless, this type of absurd is impossible to limit to all false statements since it introduced the *reductio ad absurdum*[10] as a mode of argumentation by proving the false consequences of an idea or proposition lead to its rejection. It represents the possibility to disprove a statement by logically delivering its implications to an absurd or impractical conclusion. At the same time, such an argument may demonstrate the truth of a statement or a judgement by proving its contrary argument to be false (*probation per absurdum*).[11] The second meaning of the term is more important for understanding the literary structures specific to the theatre of the absurd. This more general sense of the concept of the absurd exceeds logic and considers as absurd anything that is opposed to reason, anything that is irreducible by thinking. The second sense of the concept represented the basis for further philosophical development. The modern and contemporary philosophy of expressing and representing the antirational crisis generated the whole absurdist movement.

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[10] This line of thinking proved to be more than necessary to approach the so-called *logical games* identified many times in the theatre of the absurd. This particular type of theatre excessively employs the logical reasoning as if trying to prove itself as being absurd. As Éugene Ionesco noticed, inside existence everything is logical, thus allowing the absurdist characters to become obsessed with logic but, in fact, their use of logical means aims at decomposing the logical arguments (Ionesco, 1962: 101).

[11] Such an argumentation was extensively used by Euclid in his works concerning the axioms of geometry.

Following Georg Lukács's opinions in his *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, the economic, social, political, and ideological crisis that marked the end of the eighteenth century may be considered the starting point of modern irrationalism. Highly influenced by Schelling's philosophical analysis, Georg Lukács aimed to find a common element or elements that connect the basic philosophical systems or ways of thinking representing irrationalism and introduced by the main representatives such as Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Spengler, and Max Scheler and the existentialists Martin Heidegger and Jaspers. Such a common element was not the renouncement or the rejection of thinking[12], as perhaps expected, but what is impossible to prove or demonstrate; knowledge of the particular as opposed to the general towards which reason aims. What these philosophers and great thinkers proposed during all these centuries was the replacement of knowledge based on thinking and reasoning with knowledge based on intuitive spontaneity. For some of them, the irrational was regarded as a source for reason that reason cannot explain; others viewed the same irrationality as a conclusion of reason.

Inspired by philosophy, many writers argued against reason. For them, it is impossible to express the essence of each thing by concepts and syllogisms. Even more, some writers stood against reason, like Miguel de Unamuno, for whom anything vital is also antirational (Unamuno, 1960: 684). Similarly, instead of pure reason and logic, writers like Ortega y Gasset and Eugenio d'Ors preferred vital reasoning as more suitable to express life (Ortega y Gasset, 1946: 67). Such a tendency resumed the opposition between reason and spontaneous thinking introduced by Romanticism.[13] There are certain connections between Romantic philosophy and the literature of the absurd. Before there was any concept of the absurd, many writers and philosophers supported the idea of individual truth since they considered there was no universal truth. For writers like Chesterton, Péguy, Unamuno, and Barrès, reason could not reveal and express life. They replaced it with each person's individual truth, which functions as a means of expression, as a real language. From this very moment, literature was

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[12] Systematic and total irrationalism is impossible but there was a disbelief in the manner of thinking and reasoning starting with Blaise Pascal's argument that human judgment is corrupt and humans incapable of certain knowledge. Based on the eighteenth philosophy, the modern philosophical movement concerning irrationalism progressively developed from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

[13] As commonly known during Romanticism, tumultuous passion was employed by writers such as Friedrich Schelling in his *aesthetic idealism*, Friedrich Schlegel in his *Romantic irony,* Novalis in his *magic aestheticism*, and Eduard Hartmann in his *unconsciousness.*

invaded by symbols, myths and allusive techniques so much preferred by the writers of absurdist literature.

Besides the fact that irrationalism concerns the theory of knowledge by stating the impossibility of reducing existence to pure reason, it also provides useful instruments for a metaphysical exploration of reality. Employing irrationalism as a tool of analysis reveals not only the limits of reason but also reality's particular resistance to rational explanation and expression. Starting with Schopenhauer's famous *noumenon* that will can be approached only by intuition and never by reason, other philosophers like Nietzsche and Bergson discussed the impossibility of reducing reality to reason. The same aspect, together with other theses generated by irrationalism, became a central theme for the whole literature of the absurd. Most of the representatives sustained their individual truth(s), manifesting a strong disbelief in the universal truth based on reason. Their writings introduced a new type of world governed by different kinds of rules, irrational by essence, which transcend human thinking, thus marking the very starting point of the absurd. By removing rational thinking from any structure of the world and the universe, these writers declared reason as useless. At the same time, they also outlined the opposition between the traditional human urge to entirely capture everything rationally, to reduce everything to reason, and the new world impossible to relate to reason.[14] From this point of view, the turn of the twentieth century may be characterized by the philosophical attempt to reveal the world as mysterious and impossible to approach only by human will and the ability to understand. This perspective was changed by the writers and philosophers of the fourth decade of the twentieth century, who started to take into consideration the possibility of the absurd. Later, the idea of the absurd, sustained by philosophical irrationalism, invaded human consciousness, creating the possibility for its existence. The final step towards a theoretical form that explicitly represents the concept of the absurd was made by philosophical existentialism.

Although it is not entirely like the term absurd, the expression *absolute paradox* introduced by Kierkegaard may be considered the first

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[14] Until this moment, human thinking was engaged in the act of endowing with reason the relationship between the individual and the whole world, between the individual and humankind and between the individual and himself. Such an act was made possible by the fact that human rational thinking was regarded as being capable of reaching and understanding as well as explaining the universal truths. Following this line of thinking, the universe itself was viewed as being based on rational structures, thus everything that was real was implicitly rational; and this aspect that characterized the whole universe was rejected by the philosophy of absurd.

employment of this concept. In Kierkegaard's terminology, the concept represents an enjambment of two contradictory terms placed in the same reality. In his philosophy, an *absolute paradox*[15] is the process of thinking a particular thing and instantly finding exactly the thing that opposes it the most, such as the infinite and the temporal or liberty and necessity; in other words, finding the most opposite meanings of the same idea or concept or unifying the most extreme acts that could be experienced at the same time in any individual existence.[16] However, even this very starting point is very close to the absurd and leads to the approach of absurdist literature from the philosophical perspective and using the specific instruments of existentialism.

Existentialist philosophy is mainly concerned with existence as a possibility of experiencing the self; in other words, by life experiences through which individuals become capable of interacting with themselves. This philosophical perspective refers not to the external universe but internal representations revealed through personal experiences, which is why most writings that discuss the concept of the absurd state that philosophy in general, as well as human thinking, should begin with individual experiences that lead to the process of becoming aware of the self. In this respect, such a philosophy that puts into play the act of living, in its turn, may be transposed into a philosophy worth being lived.

The essence of the philosophical existentialism by which the philosophical, psychological and moral values concerning human existence in a modern and absurd world are enforced in human cultural mentality can be identified in Sartre's opinion that human existence led to *le néant*. The human prototype that inhabits the absurd universe is similar to Camus' Sisyphus, who finds himself trapped in a meaningless world, trying to adjust his existence to isolation and alienation while his consciousness is in constant flux, embodying itself through thoughts, speech and acts. Engaged in the attempt to find certain significance in their existence, each human being is destined to experience absurd situations that are impossible to rationalize. However, according to such a perspective, the absurd represents everything that contradicts the laws of logic. An absurd argument is in fact a formally false argument; that is, illogical. At the same time, such an argument is not meant to be the same as a false argument since a false argument is related to what does not exist while the absurd is related to what does not exist and what is not possible. Thus, on logical grounds, the relationship between what is true and what is false is based on the

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[15] For Kierkegaard it is impossible to completely understand a paradox, and he explained if it can be solely identified as a paradox, it is the true passion of thinking.

[16] Generally speaking, such a paradox may be defined as the process of unifying contraries that belong to the same reality.

relationship between existence and non-existence while the relationship between what is true and what is absurd is based on the relationship between existence and the impossibility of existence. In this respect, and using a philosophical as well as a logical perspective, the concept of the absurd is determined by its relationship with the concept of truth, and the logical approach proposed by Robert Blanché reveals its position in relation to other logical values such as possibility and impossibility.

In traditional modal logic, possibility is the central notion usually related to contingency. The confusion between these two main concepts was clarified by Robert Blanché, who made the distinction between something that is not impossible and something that is not impossible but not necessary. By qualifying something as not necessary, the very notion of necessity is introduced into the equation and related to the notion of possibility. From this perspective, possibility and necessity are the two major characters of contemporary modal logic.[17] In most systems of modal logic, the notion of necessity is defined in connection with the notion of possibility as $\neg \Diamond \neg$. Using the basic operator $\Box$ or the derived operator $\neg \Diamond \neg$, the notion of necessity could be defined as:

$$\neg \Diamond \neg \varphi \rightarrow \Diamond \varphi$$
$$\Box \varphi \rightarrow \Diamond \varphi$$

Relating the two notions, that of possibility and that of necessity, to their opposites, Łukasiewicz found the basic square of modalities meant to be employed for further systems of modal logic (Łukasiewicz, 1953: 112-117). To be determined, one notion needs to be connected to other notions in specific types of relationships. The basic square of modalities introduces the relationships of opposition as well as sub-alternation established between possibility and necessity as follows:
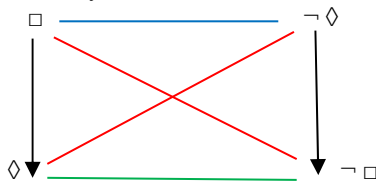

Figure 1

According to figure 1, the relationships of opposition are *contradiction*, in red, *contrariety*, in blue, and *sub-contrariety*, in green while *sub-alternation* is

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[17] The operator that corresponds to the notion of necessity is denoted by $\Box$ while the symbol $\Diamond$ denotes the notion of possibility.

in black. Following Łukasiewicz's definitions, *contradiction* bears the dichotomy that something cannot be simultaneously possible and impossible having no other choices, *sub-alternation* states that if something is necessary it may also be possible but something can be possible and not necessary (left arrow) while *contrariety* is employed for incompatibility since something cannot be necessary and impossible at the same time, and, even more, it can be either unnecessary or impossible. The relationship of *sub-contrariety* corresponds not only to the fact that something can be possible and, at the same time, not necessary but also to the fact that something cannot be possible or not necessary, not having a third choice. Maintaining the same correspondence of relationships, when the concept of the absurd is related to the concept of truth, they find themselves in contradiction for the possibility of existence contradicts the impossibility of existence. However, regarding impossibility as a type of necessity in the sense that it renders □ ¬, the significance of *not necessary* differs from the meaning of *necessary*.

The basic square of modalities was further developed into a hexagon of modalities by Robert Blanché. Based on the same relationships of opposition and sub-alternation, as in figure 2, the hexagon contains the four basic corners of the square (A, E, I, O).
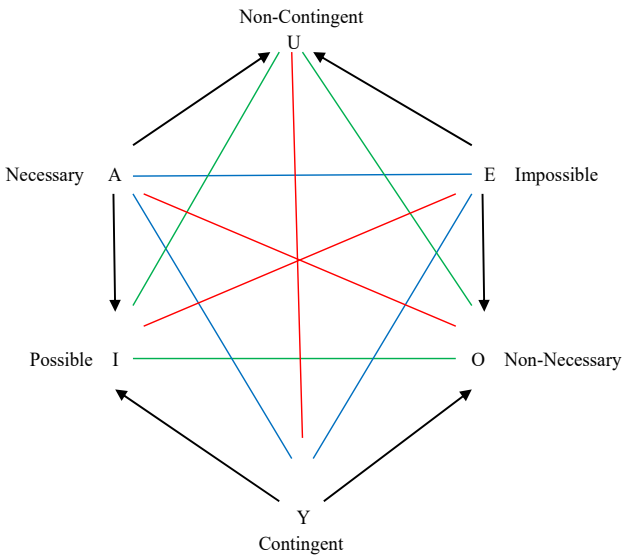

Figure 2

Figure 2 corresponds to a further reconstruction of the basic square of oppositions built on the two triangles – the blue one of *contrariety* and the green one of *sub-contrariety*. These triangles are then connected with the three axes of *contradictions*. The relationships established among the six logical modalities bound by the arrows of *sub-alternations* constitute the hexagonal geometrical figure that includes the two corners, U and Y, introduced by Robert Blanché. In his terminology, U represents the disjunction of the top A and E corners while Y stands for the conjunction between the bottom I and O corners. Such a figure included both the triangle of contrariety (AEY) and the square of oppositions (AEOI) (Blanché, 1957: 212-216).

Following the line of thinking proposed by Robert Blanché, the position of Y determines something that is possible but not necessary.[18] In a logical approach, something that is contingent is possible but something that is possible is not contingent, such as something necessary. This is why possibility may be defined as an extension of contingency that includes necessity.

Summing up, considering the notion of possibility[19] as contradictory of impossible, the meaning supported by the concept in natural languages more or less oscillates between the other two notions of I and Y, the notions whose significance is supported by the hexagon of modalities. Since the meaning of one basic notion of possibility oscillates, the further relations that imply the very notion could not be perfectly determined. The relationship between possible and impossible, mainly based on contradiction, develops further extensions. Thus, being impossible generates not only being non-contingent but also being non-necessary.

The notion of impossible as defined by the hexagon of modalities may adjust the concept of absurd as the impossibility of human existence in its connection to the concept of truth as the possibility of human existence. Even here, the contradiction is not complete or perfect. The possibility of existence does not totally contrast the concept of absurd regarded as the impossibility of existence, but it confers new quotations to the absurdity of human existence. The possibility of the impossibility of existence, hence the possibility of the absurdity of existence, might be argued against by demonstrating its necessity as well as its contingency. In discursive rational thinking, by proving the contrary argument of a concept, idea or notion to be false, the concept, idea or notion in discussion may be regarded as true.

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[18] The term used by Blanché is contingent and it was meant to contrast with possible.
[19] Tarski described the matter of possibility as follows: the problem of possibility stands in the confrontation not with one concept but with many other concepts that are denoted by one word (Tarski, 1944: 367-371).

In other words, by proving the impossibility of the impossibility of existence to be false, the possibility of the impossibility of existence may be viewed as possible. The next step in approaching the concept of the absurd is to deliver a rational explanation for it but, as demonstrated above, human reason cannot sufficiently cover all the significances and meanings of human existence. That is why a philosophical approach seems more appropriate.

CHAPTER THREE

PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES ON THE ABSURD

As is commonly known, there was no literary current that could sum up all the characteristics of absurdist literature. Similarly, there was no systematic philosophical thinking that could function as a basis for all the literary works included in such literature. The most famous writers usually related not only to absurdist literature but also to the way of thinking that might be regarded as absurd, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, introduced the absurd as one of the main subjects of existentialist philosophy. In this respect, other philosophers such as Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Jaspers may also be considered as following the same line of thinking. Moreover, existentialism was founded on Kierkegaard's aversion to Hegelian dialectics. Postulating a polemic attitude against reason, since rational thinking proved to be useless for modern times, existentialism developed as a philosophical reaction against the traditional Cartesian rationalism.[20] According to the new manner of thinking, the gap between people and their introspection was due to reason, understood in a philosophical way. Based on necessary laws and rules, reason introduced the most objective way of thinking, missing the reflexive aspects that could have diminished the gap between reality and reason, a gap that made possible the existence of the absurd.

Starting with Kierkegaard's *absolute paradox*, existentialist thinking stated the necessity to risk and sacrifice rational thinking for the sake of new experiences based solely on belief and faith founded on the medieval statement *Credo quia absurdum est*. Following Kierkegaard's philosophy, faith does not need reason but the absurd. Focusing less on *cogito* and more on *sum,* existentialist thinking rejects the abstract existence generated by objective thinking and employs the simple act of existing *hic et nunc*. The meaning of existence represents the main concern of existentialism, and it can be revealed only through the act of existing; in other words, the act of being becomes the act of existing. Such an act is not a mere abstract fact but

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[20] In his writings, Heidegger used to criticize Descartes for his incomplete search into the meaning of existence, stating that it is impossible for human thinking to cover the whole of existence (Heidegger, 1961: 18).

it may be fulfilled in a certain reality, in a certain world. This kind of world can only be approached during the act of existing and experiencing, and not in an act of thinking. The human being is inextricably bound up with the world that they find themself in. Existence itself may be revealed through feelings and moods or, better said, through *Enthüllende Gefühle*, according to Heidegger's terminology.[21]

Being-in-the-world cannot be interpreted as a mere fact but more as an act of existing in a meaningfully structured situation. Each person is disposed to things belonging to the world in a particular way, determining human behaviour as well as the manner in which they actually understand the world. Thus, understanding the world becomes being as postulated by Heidegger, meaning the famous *Dasein*, an act of projecting onto possibilities and not a cognitive and conceptual process of grasping or measuring the things belonging to that world. In fact, such a projective existential understanding of the world implicitly presumes the cognitive grasp of experiences. Employing a cognitive mastery of concepts for understanding the world misses the very purpose of understanding regarded as a continuous possibility[22]. The act of understanding the world may be translated as an act of projection. Every person is exposed to the possibilities generated by all the connections and relationships established among all the things and beings belonging to a world. These possibilities may represent the available range of the ways to be, or, better said, *Seinkönnen,* the ability-to-be (Heidegger, 1962: 143-145). By exerting such an ability, people find themselves inhabiting a shared world, and the manner they exist in the word is structured by other elements belonging to the same world. In doing so, the essence of any human being is consequently established by all the other elements of the same world and not only by the person in question. From this point of view, one understands the world in a manner similar to the one in which others understand the same world.[23] The only way to escape all

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[21] For Heidegger, moods are not at all objective properties of any entity within a given world but, at the same time, they are not subjective either; they facilitate the possibility for any human being to encounter entities within the same world by determining whether these entities would matter somehow (Dreyfus and Wrathall, 2005: 22).

[22] Different than the common sense of the concept that defines it as the contingency of something that may occur, the meaning of possibility in Heidegger's understanding of the term states it as the particular manner of dealing with things that shows them as the things they are (Heidegger, 1962: 143).

[23] This approach leads to the problem concerning the possibility of authentic self-determination. Unlike the other entities, the manner in which Heidegger's *Dasein*

possibilities and become free for the authentic individual possibilities is through death. By defining death in terms of possibilities[24], Heidegger also stated the lack of its necessity. The manner with which the human being decides to relate to death also represents a fundamental aspect of their relationship with the world. Existence itself is also related to these possibilities, including the possibility of death.

The experience of being-in-the-world may also be regarded in terms of revelation. Thus, an object is revealed by consciousness in a succession of glimpses, shadings, and profiles, but it is not exhausted by its appearances, which, in fact, are infinite (Barnes, 1992: 14). For anything to be revealed it certainly must be, but the act of being revealed is possible only through consciousness. According to Sartre's philosophical perspective, the act of becoming aware of an element is not the act of being the element. In this respect, human consciousness cannot be reduced to a thing or a substance; in fact, it is pure appearance, meaning that it may exist solely to the degree it appears, and precisely because of this status it becomes possible to consider it as absolute (Sartre, 1972: 17). The absurdity of existence is not generated only by the so-called disagreement between rational thinking and human reality but also by the special relationships established between human consciousness and the outside world. The system of rough realities has no rational support so people are forced to confront such realities. Although it is not itself a being, consciousness aims at finding meaning and purpose for this undefined being plunged into an absurd universe. Functioning as the source of all determination regarding the being, consciousness has to be related to it; but, since Sartre distinguished two types of being, being-in-itself, or *l'être-en-soi*, and being-for-itself, or *l'être-pour-soi*, it becomes difficult to establish such a relationship. The first act fulfilled by consciousness is the act of becoming aware of itself. In doing so, consciousness is projecting itself on realities for which it finds certain meanings. In order to accomplish such a purpose, consciousness needs to detach itself from these realities and negate them somehow.

Following Sartre's philosophical argumentation, consciousness stands for the activity of revealing and, as an activity, it is highly dependent on being for being is the element to be revealed; in other words, consciousness

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takes up its position in the word is neither necessitated nor well-established since the relationships enjoyed by *Dasein* with the other elements of the same world and the significance the other elements hold for *Dasein* are contingent. In its very being, for *Dasein* that particular being represents an issue for it (Heidegger, 1962: 11-13).

[24] In Heidegger's philosophy, death represents the continuous possibility of the impossibility of any other possibilities, of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing (*Ibidem*: 261-262).

is the consciousness of something (Barnes, 1992: 16). From this point of view, the activity of being may be translated as the activity of being-for-itself since Sartre assumes there must exist a being of which the property is to annihilate nothingness, to support it in its being, to sustain it perpetually in its very existence. Thus, it cannot be the being-in-itself but the being-for-itself by which nothingness comes to things (Sartre, 1972: 57). However, the being-for-itself is nothing but the being that supports the negating activity of consciousness in its attempt to give reality a certain significance and thus to find a meaning for itself too. In Sartre's philosophical vision, the necessity to find certain meanings represents the freedom to choose any meaning, including the freedom to choose an individual perspective on the world.

Considering Sartre's philosophy, the absurd stands for two main things; on one hand, it is the absurd world for which consciousness has not found any meaning, and on the other hand, it is the absurd consciousness that does not exert its function of finding certain meanings for human reality.[25] Absurdity cannot be exceeded unless there is a certain communication between consciousness and its elements, between humans and the world they inhabit, between being-in-itself and being-for-itself. The lack of such communication leads to an absurd whatsoever. Although it is already known that consciousness may exist in relation to a certain reality, and in its turn reality has meaning because of this relationship, it is still impossible to identify certain meanings that are able to cover everything that could be recognized as reality. In fact, the gap between consciousness and reality may determine the existence of the absurd. Taken separately, neither consciousness nor reality is absurd but the distance between them can generate absurdity.

Viewed by Albert Camus as the divorce between two ideals, humanity's need for significance and clarity and the obscurity of the real world, the absurd may characterize anything that cannot be related to rational categories. Moreover, the whole world becomes absurd since it could not be supported by rational thinking, which drives human reason into absurdity because of its incapacity to rationally comprehend reality. In his approach

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[25] According to Sartre's line of thinking, consciousness is, in fact, divided into the reflective and pre-reflective tendencies, meaning that it has the ability to reflect upon itself as well as to meditate and examine its own thoughts. Even more, the same consciousness also consists of constructive and deconstructive tendencies. Functioning as true ontological forces, all these tendencies are meant to determine the human being, to create their essence. In a similar manner, each character is compelled to simultaneously build up and tear down their whole being at every instant (Ekberg, 2015: 9).

to the absurd, Camus[26] followed the line of thinking started by writers such as Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Malraux, Montherlant, and Melville, and by philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Husserl, Nietzsche, and Sartre. Regarded as a starting point, the problem of the absurd is closely connected to another existential problem: the meaning of life. For Camus there is only one true philosophical problem that needs attention and that is suicide, for it leads to the possibility of admitting the absence of any reason or illusion that makes human existence worth living.[27] In an absurd universe, every human being finds themself an exile. Plunged into a world with no meaning and confronted with existence, a person becomes aware of their condition. Faced with the absurdity of life, the true sentiment that people experience is similar to Sartre's nausea. Confrontation with the world generates nothing but a real sentiment of absurd.[28] Henceforth, the phenomenological presentation of such a sentiment represents the very beginning point of an introduction to the analysis of absurd thinking. Far from considering himself an anti-existentialist thinker, Camus greatly appreciated the great representatives of existentialist philosophy, mainly for creating a certain universe dominated by contradiction, antinomy, anxiety, and alienation (Camus, 1965: 114). Such a universe, according to Camus' vision, is meant to reveal the incompatibility between the irrational factors that operate within the universe and the futile efforts of human reason to give certain significance to it. The tension between these two factors leads to an endless dispute, translated by Camus as the essence of the absurd.

For the person confronting the absurd, Camus proposed three possible solutions – physical suicide, metaphysical suicide[29] and rebellion or revolt against the absurd. Although qualified as a solution, suicide, either physical or metaphysical, is not recommended since, in the attempt to escape the consciousness of the absurd, it annihilates consciousness itself. In this way, excluding the possibility of suicide, the only remaining solution is the

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[26] Rejecting the very idea of a philosophical system, Camus' intention was not to deliver a phenomenology of the absurd, describe absurd as a genuine state of a malady or provide certain metaphysics of the absurd (Camus, 1965: 97).

[27] In Camus' viewpoint, the irrationality of the world, the human reason's nostalgia for finding meanings in everything and the absurd generated by the interaction between them constitute the three main characters of absurdist dramas (*Ibidem,* 118).

[28] The absurdity of the human condition is best captured by Camus in the image of the endless cycle of Sisyphus pushing his rock up the mountain after it rolled down and then repeating the act over and over.

[29] According to the existentialist philosophers, the human being may escape the absurd by accepting the irrational attitude towards existence which may be either religious, as in Kierkegaard's case, or transcendental, as in Jaspers' and Shestov's cases.

permanent experience of absurd. Facing the absurd means confronting and fighting it. For Camus, the human rebellion against the absurd is as important as the absurd itself for, in this way, both factors of the absurd experience remain in constant tension and conflict.

Camus' rebellious hero fighting against an absurd existence, resisting the absurd and never accepting the possibility of ultimate nihilism, is even more radical than Sartre's existentialist hero. The hero facing the absurd does not intend to explain a reality they are aware cannot be comprehended using rational instruments of analysis but, at the same time, they never stop describing it. As Merleau-Ponty considered, the absurdist hero is continuously confronting a distorted world[30] (Merleau-Ponty, 1961: 145). Dürrenmatt viewed such a world as possible solely within the derived forms of absurdist thinking and art. In a universe stripped of illusions, people feel alienated, strangers. Deprived of the memory of their lost home or having no hope of a promised land, they find themselves trapped in an endless exile. Camus described such a situation as the divorce between man and his life, or, in theatre terminology, between the actor and the setting, representing the true feeling of absurdity (Camus, 1965: 101). Facing an absurd world, deprived of rational thinking and finding no meaning in their existence, the absurd hero has only one solution: rebellion. Their fight against the absurd is not similar to other heroes' adventures, as in the case of Gide's and D'Annunzio's characters, or to other heroes' joy of living, as experienced by Péguy's, Chesterton's or Claudel's heroes. They are totally alone in their existential adventure.

Existentialist philosophy, including philosophical essays, deals with the major themes identified in absurdist literature. Narrative or dramatic, most of the texts transpose into a literary form the themes of anguish at the absurdity of existence, alienation, lack of communication, human consciousness, void identity, or *le néant*. The existence of the absurdist hero is related to the absurd world only to state its authenticity as a form of isolation, of alienation. Heidegger's *Mitsein* becomes impossible and Sartre's *être-pour-soi* may decline into *être-en-soi*. Human existence generates itself from its own possibility, which only people are capable of facilitating. Confronted not only with an absurd world but also with a meaningless existence, the absurd hero is unable to communicate. Due to the separation from their own selves, these heroes find it extremely difficult to reconnect with themselves and with others. In a desperate attempt to express states and feelings, words become ambiguous, communicating

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[30] In fact, most of the themes identified in the philosophical essays, novels and plays belonging to the absurdist literature reveal the *mal du siècle* that characterizes the turn of the twentieth century.

nothing at all and thus they turn into mere proofs of existence. Camus' rebellion against the absurd as a form of existence is also a form of self-consciousness[31], but since the absurd heroes are continuously questioning themselves, their consciousnesses are capable of reflecting their identities without identifying with them. This break represents the starting point for the absurd heroes and their void identities. Either the absurd character is experiencing alienation or finds it impossible to communicate anything or connect with others or with themselves. They are always engaged in the attempt to create their own subjective meaning in a world without any significance.

Based on existentialist philosophical reflections, the literature of the absurd, starting with Lewis Carroll, Alfred Jarry, Gogol, and Christian Morgenstern, came into the world not as a commonly recognized literature, for there was no literary current of the absurd, but more as an anti-literature. This type of literature, highly represented by Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Éugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Max Frisch, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Fernando Arrabal, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Boris Vian, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Kurt Vonnegut, was founded on the tradition of irregularities mainly by undermining rational discursive thinking as well as by replacing a certain manner of writing with a new distinct one. Together with the literary avant-garde of the twentieth century and with the existentialist philosophical current, the absurd may be considered not only a major literary theme that led to a literary movement but also a manner of thinking that has further influenced contemporary philosophy, literature and arts.

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[31] As stated by Sartre, human consciousness has a double function: to reflect and to be reflected.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LITERARY BACKGROUND

In literary history, there is no spontaneous movement; any literary current, as radical as it may be, has its roots in the past. As such, the avant-garde succeeded in shaping its own form as well as in justifying its existence using the literary background as a source of inspiration and model. Even though Eugene Ionesco considered the avant-garde a form of freedom opposed to the old literary systems, he admitted the forerunners of the theatre of the absurd influenced his work. The new literary experience should not be understood only in relation to the new but mostly as a progressive development under a new different perspective (Ionesco, 1962: 37).

Besides the aforementioned philosophical influence, the literature of the absurd also has literary roots, which are not highlighted by a continuous tradition but by elements of aesthetics specific to absurdist literature and which could be identified at certain moments of literary history. As in the case of philosophy, where the *absurd* was regarded mostly as a philosophical problem and considered a possible solution only much later, in contemporary times, in literature, the *absurd* functioned more as a literary manner than a key problem of literary works, as it is nowadays. It is commonly known that only in the 20th century was *absurd* regarded as a significant aesthetic structure for literature and arts; but absurdity represents a logical and psychological fact often used in literary creative writing and, from this point of view, absurdist literature was considered a renewal of the old artistic manners rather than a literary revolution. According to Martin Esslin, the theatre of the absurd may be seen as a return to classical tradition[32] and, more than that, the mixing of these old classical manners represents the true theatrical revolution (Esslin, 1969: 229). It is important to mention that a literary phenomenon such as the theatre of the absurd is not a case of literary syncretism and it does not prove its innovation on simple associations but on reinventing the manner of writing, pushing forward the classical past.

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[32] Referring to the *avant-garde*, Éugene Ionesco stated that the theatre of the absurd returned to the universal essence with the purpose of telling the forgotten truth, bringing it up to date (Ionesco, 1962: 40-41).