

The Literature of the Absurd: Writing against Death

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Abstract: After World War I, an interesting development appeared in the Western literature, especially in the field of drama, which came to be known as the Theatre of the Absurd. One of the main characteristics of this type of theatre is the rejection of the elementary rules of language and logics as a manifestation of man's inability to communicate with his fellow beings. In an attempt to confront man with the ultimate realities of his existence, The Theatre of the Absurd presents the image of a meaningless tragic world, it expresses the anxiety and tragic condition of the man who realises the purposeless nature of his own life in an overmechanized, hyper organized society in which man's basic condition is one of continuous alienation. Playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Eugen Ionescu, Adamov, Pinter, Albee, projected their characters against a background of death, in a mysterious world often looked upon as a labyrinth or as a jungle. In their work, human beings are seen as doomed through their very human condition of suffering and even dying. Thus, death, which is actually a tragic event, is present in the very act of living.

Keywords: death; fear; absurd; loneliness; scream; suffering; emptiness

The playwrights of the Absurd, aware of the absurdity of experience, see existence as essentially governed by the irrational and are conscious of man's sufferings, struggles and failures. Hence, such themes such as emptiness, frustration, despair and death.

If Camus argues that in our disillusioned age the world ceased to make sense, he does so in the rationalistic and discursive style of an eighteenth-century moralist, in well-constructed and polished plays. If Sartre argues that existence comes before essence and that human personality can be reduced to pure potentiality and the freedom to choose itself at any moment, he presents his ideas in plays based on brilliantly drawn characters that remain totally consistent.

The Theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand, goes towards a radical devaluation of language, towards a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends and often contradicts the word spoken by the characters. In Eugen Ionescu's *The Chairs*, for example, the poetic content of a

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powerfully poetic play does not lie in the banal words that are uttered, but in the fact they are spoken to a growing number of empty chairs.

As far as Ionescu's work is concerned, his prose could be more interesting to approach, as criticism has always focused on his plays, almost forgetting about his autobiographical writings.

The feeling of death is the obsession that Ionescu ceaselessly expresses from the beginning till the end. He discovers it at the age of four or five years old, as he confesses in his journals and it will become the anguish that will haunt his whole existence. The key words of his plays or memoirs are: anguish, scream, fear, fright, anxiety, fall, panic, terror, emptiness, torture, collapse, horror.

In *Journal at the Age of 16*, the omnipresence of death paralyzes him. The pages of literary criticism in *No* are full of digressions talking about the same obsession, just like in the study on Ion Barbu: "Serious parenthesis. Topic: Death wanders around us, it robs us." After that, a memorable fragment: "At sunset, a cart coming from Bucharest; in the hay, the corpse of a young peasant. Near the dead man's head, a living human was holding a candle close to his cheek. The dead man was very serious, but slipshod and unshaved. His head would shake from time to time." (Ionescu, 1991, p. 68) But this fragment is just a soft variant of the anguish which is sometimes revealed through an atrocious turmoil: "Panic, scream, death. The earth shakes under my feet...God, all the walls shake here; all the bridges fall down...everything collapses...I scream...I hit myself...I slide." (Ionescu, 1991, p. 58) Then, the histrionic vocalizations in *Intermezzo no. 1*: "I will die. I will d-i-e. I will d-i-i-e." (Ionescu, 1991, p. 104)

It is not only about this obsession that Eugen Ionescu and Jeni Acterian, two human beings "difficult to please", feel and think the same. The next fragment from Jeni Acterian's journal is similar to the fragment in *No*: "Some day I will die. I will die. It's not anyone else [...] it is me the one who will die, me, me, me. However, this is valid for the others, too. Eugen says: "I'm dying, dying, dying. Impossible". He says the same thing and he is not the only one." (Acterian, 1985, p. 164)

For Ionescu, death is not just a literary theme, but a presence that he feels and causes him sleeplessness. Actually, death and fear are simultaneously felt and staged according to the binary scheme that we know. At a certain moment, the fear is paroxistically exhibited: "I am scared. Once, I had the feeling of the imminence of death: it was a mess inside me, a panic, a scream coming from all my body, a terrified refusal against my whole being." (Ionescu, 1991, p. 68)

Trying to "tame this inadmissible scandal" which is death, Ionescu conceives the so-called syllogism of death in *Intermezzo no. 2*, where he states: "I am death". Then, why is the human being scared of what defines the nucleus of his own

ontology? Using Eugen Ionescu's words: "Why am I afraid of myself, of what my essence represents?" In another fragment from *No*, the author describes the bewilderment of a friend who, seeing him worried about the problem of death (and he was only 20!), advises him to live in the present. And Ionescu replies: "Ceaselessly living the moment is just an illusion, as it goes away." (Ionescu, 1991, p. 203)

Just like death, the symptoms of anguish can be found even in early childhood. Ionescu confesses that he felt the anguish especially when he could not understand the connection between the noises, objects and beings in front of him. In other words, anguish is a continuous state interrupted by very short periods of peace. Somewhere, in *The Intermittent Search*, he speaks of "the return to Anguish, like the return home." (Ionescu, 1994, p. 30) For feeling it, he does not need any disasters; on the contrary, it may appear in unimportant situations: "A stomach ache. And everything goes down." (Ionescu, 1994, p. 15) The thought of death turns everything into vanity, because "all of us die." The most thrilling presence is the presence of death itself that lives inside us, the one that we smell, the one we breathe in from flowers, from the air." In fact, in his opinion, "any feeling is based on death."

In spite of the Thanatotherapy exercises that he imagines, he will never get used to what he found out when he was four years old. He feels that death is a humiliation of the human condition. He starts writing, trying to "exorcise" himself through the writing cure. It is known that Freudian psychoanalysis considers that sublimation is a mechanism of defence against frustration; thus, writing becomes a way of salvation and escaping reality, just like for many other artists.

Samuel Beckett, like many other great writers: Dostoievski, Borges, Proust, Faulkner, or philosophers like Nietzsche or Kierkegaard, cannot be understood outside metaphysics or religion, outside that essential problem which obsessed them, knowing that they would never solve it. Just like Ionescu, Samuel Beckett speaks seriously about things and feelings that we prefer to ignore: old age, loneliness, death, and the false idols that we adopt and then we reject. His pessimism and nihilism can be interpreted as invitations of looking upon existence in a realistic way, of contemplating the human condition and the contradictions of the contemporary world with no sentimentalism. Even Eugen Ionescu said about the English writer: "Beckett too clearly grinds the black aspects."

In his plays, death is an obsession, just like in Ionescu's work. The characters' wish to die may be considered a tragic rebellion against existential loneliness. Death is symbolically rendered through the metaphors of Time, Loneliness, and Departure.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon are trapped, not being able to leave or to part. Their lives last only one day, as if time were not a travel through years, months and days. Their so-called travel is just a static one:

“Pozzo: [Suddenly furious] Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When! One day is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?” (Beckett, 1986, p. 83) This reminds us of the general atmosphere in *No*, by Eugen Ionescu.

Actually, life is just a travel towards the night (another metaphor for death). In the following retort, time does not even exist, there is only present, as if memory had died: nothing to be remembered, nothing to hope for.

“Estragon: [Aphoristic for once] We all are born mad. Some remain so.

Pozzo: I don’t remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won’t remember having met anyone today. So, don’t count on me to enlighten you.” (Beckett, 1986, p. 82)

In *Endgame*, Clov speaks about time as about a continuous stream which ends in death. In the end, there is nothing to be said, nothing to be understood (just like in Ionescu’s *Intermezzo no. 1*):

“Clov: I say to myself – sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go – one day. But I feel too old and too far, to form new habits. God, it’ll never end, I’ll never go. [Pause.] Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes, I don’t understand, it dies, or it’s me, I don’t understand that either. I ask the words that remain – sleeping, waking, morning, evening. They have nothing to say.” (Beckett, 1986, p. 132)

However, in *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon remembers that once he wanted to commit suicide and he is still thinking of it, considering suicide to be “the best thing”:

“Estragon: Do you remember the day I threw myself into the Rhone?

Vladimir: We were grape harvesting.

Estragon: You fished me out.

Vladimir: That’s all dead and buried

Estragon: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.

Vladimir: What other? [Pause] What other?

Estragon: Like billions of others.” (Beckett, 1986, p. 58)

Death is also to be found in loneliness and sadness. It is known that Otto Rank developed the theory about the artists’ unconscious *fear of life*, which is the fear of having to live as an isolated individual, as the artist becomes aware of the creative powers inside him and this will bring about the separation from the others. As

artists, Beckett and Ionescu must have suffered from the fear of life, from a certain anxiety and this is something easy to be found in their works, which render a similar atmosphere. They were not “normal” people, they chose to be creative individuals, ready to live alone and create their own standards.

Loneliness can mean freedom or despair, and also existential burden. Kierkegaard considered that: “The deeper his anxiety, the greater the man.” (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 68) Could this statement be compared to Camil Petrescu’s judgement, according to which “the more consciousness, the more tragedy”? Perhaps it could. It should be mentioned that the two writers tried to survive their traumas and to heal their souls through writing. The human universe proves its strength by suffering and people can reach the supreme dignity only by endurance. And death with all its facets – fear, mystery, expectation, and suicidal search – is the main reason of suffering. Through fiction, Beckett and Ionescu tried to reach a certain understanding and acceptance. “Acceptance is their only revolt”, Octavian Paler would have said. (Paler, 1975, p. 25)

In *Film*, Beckett writes:

“W1: Silence and darkness were all I craved. Well, I get a certain amount of both. They being one. Perhaps it is more wickedness to pray for more.” (Beckett, 1986, p. 316)

Silence is the death of words. They can no longer express anything; they become useless, unable to reveal the essence of the human soul. Through their death, words reach the realm of darkness that Eugen Ionescu himself wrote about.

Accepting loneliness is the only thing left for the artist. Moreover, isolation and alienation belong to the human condition. It must be pointed out that Ionescu suffered from the Oedipus complex because of the tension existing between him and his father in childhood. Therefore, the obsession for loneliness and death must have come from frustration and his feeling of guilt. He was obsessed with death, seen like a threatening limit he was afraid of; in other words, the ultimate experience.

But, it is not very important not to forget that, although obsessed with death, Beckett, nor Ionescu committed suicide. Could we say that literature saved them? Was writing a way of dealing with their fears? It is hard to say. There is always something hidden in artists’ unconscious. And fears never go away...

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