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The nature of the Absurd in Romantic Literature

Concrete definitions regarding the idea of the Absurd have generated controversies since the 19th century. While vastly used in daily life as a synonym of being illogical, unreasonable or foolish, absurdity or absurdism – both nouns are used almost interchangeably, although the latter is more commonly used when being referred to as a philosophical theory – different authors and critics have associated the Absurd with the duality of “love of life and [the] concomitant awareness of the inevitability of death” (Bowker, 48), and the consequences of such dichotomy in the meaning of living. Giving rise to an eponymous branch in fiction (most prominently in theater), absurdist ideas are typical of the Modern period. The aim of this essay is then to provide different views from key figures with respect to the topic mentioned aforesaid and find evidences of the Absurd in literary works studied in the course, presenting, therefore, Romanticism as some sort of precursor to this modern school of thought. Besides documenting such findings, central aspects of Romantic literature such as the sublime and social critique will be explained based on an absurdist perspective. The main works analyzed were the Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole and a series of poems, with emphasis on John Keats and William Wordsworth's writings.

One of the pioneering explanations for the Absurd was proposed by Søren Kierkegaard. The Danish philosopher saw “the human being as strung between two basic poles or two constitutive aspects of humanness”, with one pole being “our particular internal perspective within finite life;

the other is our capacity to objectify ourselves and our world” (Mehl, 6). While subjectivity provides knowledge about oneself, objectivity classifies life as “arbitrary (...) just a drop in the ocean, a seemingly meaningless moment” (Mehl, 67-68). The attempt to reconcile these two opposing views is the source of despair according to Kierkegaard and religious faith is the possible solution to transcend it. Thomas Nagel, a contemporary philosopher, adds a temporal and spatial deixis to the Absurd, saying that “minuteness and brevity appears to be infinitely connected with the sense that life is meaningless” (716). However, human beings are able to perceive such absurdities due to self-consciousness. In order not to view life devoid as of meaning, one would have to cease being self-conscious and “the only way to avoid the relevant self-consciousness would be either never to attain it or to forget it – neither of which can be achieved by the will” (725). One last key figure proposing the Absurd is Albert Camus. He illustrated his theory based on the Myth of Sisyphus – the king of Ephyra in Greek Mythology who was condemned by the gods of Olympus to incessantly repeat the same action of rolling a boulder up a mountain only to see it fall back down, thus rendering his efforts hopeless and futile. However, as the author explains, it is the positive attitude towards continuing living instead of giving up that provides the meaning one wishes to attain since “the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus, 78). Through these three theories, it is possible to conclude that the Absurd results from the awareness of the transience of life (which could detach oneself from his/her reality) and the inevitability of death, therefore it “represents the convergence between the sense of alienation and the yearning for unity” (Sagi, 2), with wholeness as the ultimate happiness. As one becomes aware of the inherent absurdities in life, positive or negative reactions could be drawn from it and these approaches will have different outlets in distinct works, thus contributing to the wide

range of characteristics impregnated in the Absurd. It is worth noticing that a negative response here is not a synonym of suicide, either a physical or a psychological one. The theories from the last two philosophers seems to equate to the thoughts of the Romantics, for religion is given less importance for this literary movement and both Nagel and Camus suggest spontaneity, creativity and positiveness to be linked with the Absurd.

The Gothic movement in literature relies considerably on the Absurd, as it “has the power to invent social and political scenarios that differ wildly from the status quo” (Ledoux, 9). In *The Castle of Otranto*, the Absurd element is more evident and assumes a more impersonal tone (partly due to the 3rd person narrator), and is based heavily on incongruities and misunderstandings between the characters and the comic effect generated by those contradictions. In accordance with the chronological order of the novel, Walpole writes in the preface of the first edition that “everything tends directly to the catastrophe” (6), mimicking then the mortal aspect of human life and transposing it onto paper. Right at the beginning of chapter one, the readers gain knowledge that Manfred, the patriarchal figure and prince of Otranto is not apparently the real owner of the castle as a supernatural prophecy dictates he would lose his rights to reside in the stronghold once the “real owner should grow too large to inhabit it” (17). The prompt enactment of the prophecy, more like a curse, on Conrad – Manfred’s heir and youngest son – as he is crushed by an oversized helmet, while initially terrorizing, adds a certain comic quality to it and can be view as absurd (the reader has no idea from where the helmet fell and its size is contrary to common knowledge), since the falling head piece “threatened to undermine the seriousness of Conrad’s death [and] could easily become laughable” (Ledoux, 34). The helmet is later seen as the same one Alfonso, the Good wears in his portray, paving the way for one of the unusual and recurring coincidences of the plot.

After the death of his only male child, Manfred offers himself almost immediately to Isabella, another comic moment from the novel. The maiden refuses to marry the older man and escapes from the castle, aided by a young peasant, later identified as Theodore and there is an apparent guidance from nature – the moonlight either presenting to the prince images of the dreadful armor or illuminating her possible escape like when it “shone directly on the lock” (30) on the basement. The favoritism of the part of nature, somehow only applied to certain characters, constitutes another absurd aspect, as it becomes too coincidental. A succession of supernatural elements starts to surround the stronghold from the moment Manfred’s lineage is in danger of reaching an end – “deep sighs” (26) are heard from portraits. Diego and Jaquez, his servants, affirms to have seen the foot and part of the leg of the same armor which the helmet was part of, and later in chapter four, “three drops of blood fell from the nose of Alfonso’s statue” (97). The prophecy seems to be fulfilled as more armory parts appear - “Oh the hand! The giant! The hand!” (102) as per Bianca and the saber found by Frederic. These ghostly figures terrorize the habitants of Otranto since they are beyond the empiric knowledge and constitute the irrational, the unexplainable. To try to unify these two aspects generates a paradox and the impossibility to reconcile them provokes the Absurd. As Cornwell states, “horror and absurdity go together” (134).

Coincidences in the plot are also linked with mistaken or shadowed identities: both Matilda and her maid notice how Theodore physically resembles Alfonso, with the former even mentioning a connection with the male in regards to her destiny. Bianca also wonders whether the “stranger may be some prince in disguise” (45) – this is one of the first instances of foreshadowing in the novel. Part of his persona is further revealed as he is ready to receive a death sentence from Manfred when the priest Jerome suddenly recognizes him as his long lost

son. The surprise from this plot twist provides a comic relief for the reader and even inside the novel itself, “the tears of the assistants were suspended by wonder, rather than stopped by joy” (57). The arrival of Frederic in Otranto, with the marquis accusing Manfred of being a usurper, poses one more question regarding identity and renders the plot with too many coincidences, which is typical of the Absurd – the “unexpected, abnormal and implausible eventualities” (Gavins, 49). Other absurdities regarding the characters lie in the speeches of the present lord of the Castle: he declares his need for another son based on his own reasons (selfishness) and heightened sentimentality that even the narrator makes a side remark that “the knights gazed on each other, wondering where this would end” (69). Since his actions contradicts the melodramatic mood, his words are rendered meaningless and become incoherent.

On the topic of exaggerations, Theodore himself overdoes his behavior in front of Matilda; in an instance, he “flung[s] himself at her feet” (74) to simply kiss her hand or in end of the novel when the maiden dies, the newly restored prince “printed a thousand kisses on her clay-cold hands” (112), blinded by grief. These moments might have evoked the *pathos* of its contemporary readers but nevertheless are seen as comical precisely because they are exaggerated to the point of becoming fake. To conclude the analysis of the novel, should readers see Matilda's death, Manfred's unpunished exile and Theodore's melancholic marriage as inability to change the society one lives in? Is the patriarchal system (either political or religious) the force that dictates the course of living? As the Absurd resides between the comparison of two opposite forces, if we input ideals such as equality and justice on one extreme and the oppressive “rule of the father” on the other, we will find that they don't match and as we try to converge both principles (the yearning for unity as stated before), a sense of displeasure might rise and lead to rebellion. This could be seen as a positive reaction to the Absurd as it “recommends a

kind of simple individualism (...) we become bound to seek a social system that promotes maximal length, intensity and freedom for each's individual's life. Hence we must oppose (...) any ideology that subordinates human flesh and blood” (Bowker, 57) and “the reader of the novel is in turn also a rebel or an outsider questioning his or her sense of unity” (Curzon-Hobson, 472), instilling then a propensity for rebellion.

Absurdism in poetry assumes a much more personal tone, especially in Romantic literature as most writers of this movement protested against the chain of reason raised by the Age of Enlightenment by advocating a natural style of writing characterized by spontaneity. It is worth noticing that the Absurd is not as clearly stated as in the novel but nonetheless we might assume different outlets of it in the alienation of the poetic subject, the language used by the writer, the dreaminess of setting and the role of nature as both unifying and diverging source (nature as inspiration for living but also as destroyer – time is not forgiving).

William Wordsworth warns in the “Preface” to his *Lyrical Ballads* that readers might “struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness” (252) due to incongruities and paradoxes in his poems, mostly associated also with an element of supernatural, just like in the Gothic novel. In “She was a Phantom of Delight”, the poetic subject portrays a female figure which could be a creation as she is a “Traveller between life and death” (26), just like any other human but she is also “A perfect Woman, nobly planned” (29), therefore not natural and “yet a Spirit still” (31). In “She dwelt among the untrodden ways”, the contradiction is already present in the first verse, as how can the supposed female figure, later named as Lucy, be in a place where no one has walked before, providing thus a confusing spatial and temporal deixis. The uncertainty of the woman described in both poems can be related to the Absurd as they seem to be the juxtaposition of antagonistic terms: being human and at the same time sharing qualities of

an apparition. Finally in “Strange fits of passion have I known”, the poetic voice is the one to perpetuate this absurdity by enacting the conflict of sleeping and yet “all the while my eyes I kept / On the descending moon” (19-20).

John Keats could be more strongly linked with Camus' ideas of the Absurd as the issue of death features more prominently in his poetry, most probably due to his self-perception of having contracted tuberculosis. In “On the Elgin Marbles”, the speaker remarks that “My spirit is too weak; mortality / Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep” (1-2). The subject recognizes his impending death and “Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep” (6) – similar to Sisyphus, for he wants to experience the “indescribable feud” (10) – the convergence of fatality and immortality (an Absurd aspect), whether it is about life or art, since it could possibly give him access to the sublime. Another poem which deals with the transience of the speaker's life is “When I have fears that I may cease to be” in which a more melancholic tone is adopted; the poetic voice affirms that “Of the wide world I stand alone” (13) reflecting another possible aspect of the Absurd in poetry – the “isolation of the poetic persona” (Gavins, 147), as the inability to cope with the surrounding reality might make one focus on his/her internal sensibility and this way alienate from the external world. The awareness of a concrete sphere and the unwillingness to dwell on it will lead to the Absurd. “Ode to a Nightingale” is the third expression of contemplations regarding the inexorable goal of life. The perplexing setting experienced by the poetic voice mimics a hallucinatory state as if he had taken “hemlock” (2) or “some dull opiate” (3). Whether this reflects the poetic subject's wish to escape or constitutes a way to fight his “drowsy numbness pains” (1) – a paradox on the uncertain nature of his suffering – is not clearly explained, though the reader might prefer the first option as the speaker later insists “with thee [the nightingale] fade away into the forest dim:” (20). In spite of sounding like a suicide attempt

the departure to nature, if the eponymous bird of the poem is the unifying element of pain with the yearning of living, since it “singest of summer in full-throated ease” (10), then its pursuit is the same as an attempt to reach the sublime, an expression of the acceptance of the Absurd.

Further in the poem, in stanza IV, the poetic voice seems to have joined the nightingale – “Though the dull brain perplexes and retards: / Already with thee! Tender is the night,” (34-35) – which might only be possible in the realm of the imagination as physically it would be probably impractical. The process of the sudden transition is left unexplained and might require the reader to reject any rational thinking in order to understand it. The Absurd might imply “a rejection of all forms of rational absolutism” (Foley, 17). From a linguistic point of view, the colon and dashes, in terms of punctuation, symbolize the failure of language to explicitly delineate the Romantic sublime and changes of state respectively. The last verse of the poem reflects both ideas: “Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?” (80). The use of language is thus connected to the Absurd – “Hume and Nietzsche had already pointed the impotence of human language that, because of its universal structure, cannot fully exhaust the concrete” (Sagi, 52). Since art is imitation, the process of writing the author's experience can be, at maximum, only a close representation of reality but not the entirety of it. To try to achieve a linguistic form that can satisfy the replica correlates with the idea of living even aware of death as its ultimate end and thus bringing forth the Absurd.

In contrast to the three odes mentioned above, “Ode on Melancholy” seems to provide a more positive and mature view regarding life and suffering. To begin with, an ode is a song of praise but the subject of the compliment is melancholy, an emotion which normally people try to avoid. While previously shadowed by suffering, the speaker of this poem is aware that living is comprised by a series of ephemeral characteristics - “Beauty that must die” (21) or “Joy, who

hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu;” (22-23) – and yet the melancholy brought by the end of those elements is ever necessary for appreciating and developing a positive attitude towards life, much like Sisyphus, mirroring his efforts to continuously pushing the boulder, even if in the end it is just futile to do so.

The last poem analyzed for this essay is “La Belle Dame sans Merci”. With Gothic overtones and dropping the feasible connection to the author itself, this poem is presented as a frame narrative composed by different layers namely a dream scenario, the standpoint of the knight and the narrator himself. The boundary between each layer is not well delimited and their speeches gets mingled, possibly compromising the trust the reader has in the speaker. Gavins proposes that “unreliable narrators are one of the most common features of absurd (...) fiction” (86). It either leads to not trustworthy imagery or distorted ones (incongruities) that challenges the knowledge of the reader.

To sum up, the Absurd can be expressed through various ways and find outlets in divergent genres and forms. It can be materialized in elements of the plot or through the interactions between the characters or in relation to the surrounding reality (more applicable to poetry). While it may just invoke a certain skepticism in the reader, “the absurd subject, meditating on his condition, realizes at last that his condition is the common human condition” (Foley, 28).

Romantic literature is based on subjective experiences and the use of creativity in order to express the sublime and/or criticize social norms (like in the novel analyzed). It could be seen as reactions to the recognized absurdities those authors had encountered or made themselves aware of. Romanticism then doesn't focus mainly on developing the Absurd but nevertheless shows elements of it which later would be one of the focal points of Modernist theories.

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