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## The paradox of death and the Theatre of the Absurd

*"ARTHUR: Śmierć – wspaniała forma!"<sup>1</sup>*

Sławomir Mrożek, Tango

### 1. Introduction

In this article<sup>2</sup> I presented a kind of panoramic research with reference to the pattern of eschatological problems in the Theatre of the Absurd. Generally, the main objective of this paper is to discuss the topos of Death in the Theatre of the Absurd.

The obsession with the end and the inevitability of Death, according to Martin Heidegger's *"Sein zum Tode"*<sup>3</sup>, are the main unifying ideas of content and form in the Theatre of the Absurd. In the works of Samuel Beckett, Eugenio Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Fernando Arrabal, Sławomir Mrożek and many others, Death is given leitmotif significance. It has a great influence on the atmosphere and composition of plays. Moreover, it functions as a biological determinant and the only point of reference.

In a world created by the authors of the Absurd, *"women give birth astride a grave"* (Beckett) and everyone approaches Death beyond which there is only nothingness. This paradox of existence is an intrinsic feature of the "dissolving structure" of *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, the enigmatic anticipation for Godot (*Waiting*

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur's expression from *Tango* by Sławomir Mrożek ("Death – the splendid form!").

<sup>2</sup> This article is part of the whole included in "The Thanatical Trilogy of The Theatre of The Absurd" by Dariusz Piotr Klimczak and constitutes the basic thesis of his dissertation: D.P. Klimczak, *Śmiertelnicy. Teatr Absurdu Samuela Becketta przestrzeni Misterium Mortis*, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Instytut Wyd. „Maximum”, Warszawa – Kraków 2006; Idem, *Mistyka błękitu. Eugenio Ionesco dramatyczna eschatologia absurdu*, NCK, Instytut Wyd. „Maximum”, Warszawa – Kraków 2008; Idem, *Tango śmierci. Sławomira Mrożka rzeczy ostateczne*, NCK, Instytut Wyd. „Maximum”, Warszawa – Kraków 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Acc. to: Martin Heidegger's formula: *"Existing towards Death"*. See: M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen 1967.

for *Godot*) and Winnie buried in a mount (*Happy days*). It is an inherent attribute of Beckett's obsession *par excellence* of our planet getting cool and empty, and also creates the macrocosm of Ionesco's Absurd theatre (the swelling corpse of *Amédée / Amédée, or How to Get Rid of it/* and the mushrooms growing up in the dying king's apartment */Exit the King/*). It is also present in the discussion about certain Bobby, about whom the Smith family cannot tell for sure whether he is still alive or dead, whether he really existed or not (*The Bald Soprano*). It is also rooted in the sub-text of the "pseudo-political" plays of Adamov and in metaphysical and catastrophic dreams, like "*the whole world is dead, only I am left*" (*La Parodie*) etc. Eugenia's catafalque in Sławomir Mrożek's *Tango* and the cannibalistic roulette in *Out at Sea* [pol. *Na pełnym morzu*] make up the funeral and eschatological code of the Absurd theatre. Its whole intellectual message can be expressed in the following statement: No society has ever been successful in getting rid of unhappiness; no political system can free our lives from grief and the fear of Death<sup>4</sup>.

In this paper, I would like to pose some interesting and stimulating questions, refer to the eschatological and also apocalyptic sources of the Theatre of the Absurd<sup>5</sup>. Because the subject has not been explored enough so far, I will try to triangulate the Theatre of the Absurd within the genre of drama first, and then move on to a short reflection on chosen plays by Beckett and Ionesco, concentrating on the role that eschatological elements, funereal objects and eschatons play in them. The starting point of this paper could be phrased as "the eschatology of the Absurd" or "immortality deconstructed". Meaninglessness, as the value of absolute meaning, the meaning (*Sinn*) and significance (*Bedeutung*) of Death in the Theatre of the Absurd, will also be discussed. As a method of research, I propose a short "collective phenomenological analysis". To analyse the issue from a broader perspective, I take into account the relationship between the authors and their times, and refer to cultural sources, specifically to the Paradox of Death in the Theatre – especially in the Theatre of the Absurd.

## 2. Eschatological reflection according to the Absurd

This fear of the most final and critical sphere of existence sets the problem of Death not only in the context of a general, eschatological reflection taken *an block*, but most importantly is also associated with the emotions connected with the

<sup>4</sup> See: Ionesco's reply to Kenneth Tynan's review, *Ionesco. A man of destiny?* ("The Observer", 22.06.1958), which appeared in the next issue.

<sup>5</sup> See some interesting studies related to this problem: J. Kott, *The Memory of the Body. Essays on Theater and Death*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1992; M. Esslin, *Memento mori*, [in:] "*Plays and Players*" of November 1963; M.S. Barranger, *Death as Initiation in Exit the King*, [in:] "*Educational Theater Journal*" 1975, no. 27, pp. 504–507; R.C. Lamont, *The Double Apprenticeship: Life and the Process of Dying*, [in:] *The Phenomenon of Death*, ed. E. Wyschogrod, New York 1973, pp. 198–224; C. Sharp, *The Dance of Death in Modern Drama: Auden, Dürrenmatt and Ionesco*, "Modern Drama" 20 (1977), pp. 107–116; W. Shibles, *Death. An Interdisciplinary Analysis*, Wisconsin 1974; E. G. Wright, *The Vision of Death in Ionesco's Exit the King*, "Soundings" 54 (1971), pp. 435–449.

conviction that man has no direct experience of Death. Albert Camus expressed the idea explicitly, claiming that everything has been said on the issue. Surprisingly, everybody lives as if they knew nothing about it. That is because there is no experience of Death<sup>6</sup>. The dramatists of the Absurd fill in the gap of this missing experience by following Jean Paul Sartre's statement on the problem, "our birth is just as absurd as our death", which means that Death is as an authentic existential experience and a natural law which cannot be denied. By making Death and suffering free from layers of extra meanings that had been growing around them since antiquity, the authors of the Absurd have created the most convincing version of "the ever emptier existence".

Martin Esslin, an expert on the Theatre of the Absurd, noted the following: The Theatre of the Absurd forms part of the unceasing endeavour of the true artists of our times to breach this dead wall of complacency and automatism and to re-establish the awareness of man's situation when confronted with the ultimate reality of his condition<sup>7</sup>. In other words, the artists of the Absurd disclose the truth about our existence in the context of the "inflexible" reality<sup>8</sup>.

In the context of my approach to the problem, this remark seems quite helpful in defining the basic categories and – following more specifically, the use of the metaphor – the "eschatological tree", or a specific *axis mundi* (by Mircea Eliade) of the Theatre of the Absurd and the absurd of existence (and *vice versa*). The theater grows out of existence and (*vv*) existence grows out from the theater.

The analysis of funerary, mortuary, and eschatological elements that represent the topos of Death in the Theatre of the Absurd, is the subject of this thesis. The issue interests me at an academic level only, which makes it possible to assume a balanced approach to it, free from "the freshness of an untouched material". In my opinion, however, the subject is underexplored and, therefore, requires a careful examination. There is a stimulating question that needs to be answered, namely what is the area covered by the meaning of Death, starting with "Winnie's mount" (Beckett), "the corpse of *Amédée*" (Ionesco) and ending with "Euegenia's catafalque"

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<sup>6</sup> See: A. Camus, *Dwa eseje [Two essays]*, trans. into Polish by J. Guze, Warszawa, 1991, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> M. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Eyre&Spottiswoode Press, London 1962, p. 291. [M. Esslin, *Znaczenie absurdu*, trans. into Polish by P. Bikont, "Pamiętnik Literacki" LXVII, 1976, vol. 3].

<sup>8</sup> As Esslin remarks, they place us in the Absurd space of time: "waiting between birth and death (Beckett's plays); man running away from death, climbing higher and higher in Vian's play, or passively sinking down toward death, in Buzatti's; man rebelling against death, confronting and accepting it, in Ionesco's (*Tuer Sans Gages*); man inextricably entangled in a mirage of illusions, mirrors reflecting mirrors, and forever hiding ultimate reality, in the plays of Genet (...) man trying to stake out a modest place for himself in the cold and darkness that envelops him, in Pinter's plays; man vainly striving to grasp the moral law forever beyond his comprehension, in Arrabal's; man caught in the inescapable dilemma that strenuous effort leads to the same result as passive indolence – complete futility and ultimate death – in the earlier work of Adamov". *Ibidem*, p. 292.

(Mroźek)? The meaning of Death is clarified by the presence of specific artifacts, symbols, marks, objects, absurd dialogues, and paradoxes; the components that build up the Macrocosm of the Theatre of the Absurd. Besides, it would be worthwhile to examine the “philosophizing with form” in the Absurd THEATRUM MUNDI and in MISTERIUM MORTIS, where the discourse on Death becomes a peculiar form of “the worn-out language tragedy”.

So far, this matter has not been studied with much insight. Quite often, only selected issues or works were taken into account, which resulted in fragmentary conclusions. This thesis is an aspiration for creating a more general horizon of eschatological problems in the Theatre of the Absurd by examining them from a specific perspective.

It is my objective to carry out a certain experiment, the idea of which was anticipated by Ionesco. I am convinced that every drama of the Absurd conveys the same message/idea of Death. If we had a closer look at any piece of art or drama in order to explore it in an existential, psychoanalytical or even religious (Buddhist, Christian or Judaistic) way, we would see that our object of study has no ideological limits, but rather passes on “the idea”. A play cannot be considered only as an illustration of religious, existential or psychoanalytical thoughts. Ionesco expressed the idea as follows: In other words, it was not Freud who inspired Sophocles, but Sophocles inspired Freud. Ideology is not the source of art. Art is the soil in which an ideology can grow. Art is a natural resource for ideologies<sup>9</sup>.

A question arises, whether a playwright has the right to know the truth about the reality or not. Does he have the right to define the fundamental antinomies of human existence?

A playwright has the right to express his obsessions and anxieties that stem from his observation of the world, but also to find out what his own limitations are. A piece of art has a variety of functions, among which there is one that intensifies dreams, anxieties and despairs of society. In other words, the basic function of every piece of art is to deepen our anxieties, that is, to disclose those spheres of life that only artists know about. To be more alert, one does not need to be happier<sup>10</sup>.

Of course, talking about Death in this context may sound melancholic, but in a world created by artists one can think of getting used to Death somehow. A recent study on Death in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* by Ester Singer is quite convincing in this respect. Death still inspires many scientists concerned with sociology of Death and dying, history of Death, thanatology, and, most importantly, eschatology. Outstanding works of Phillippe Ariès<sup>11</sup>, Louis-Vincent Thomas<sup>12</sup>, Gabrielle and

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<sup>9</sup> Acc. to: “Dialog. Miesięcznik Poświęcony Dramaturgii Współczesnej” Warsaw 1958, no. 7, p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> See: Ibidem, p. 152.

<sup>11</sup> See: Ph. Ariès, *L'Homme devant La Mort*, Éditions du Seuil 1977.

<sup>12</sup> See: L. V. Thomas, *La cadavre. De la biologie a l'anthropologie*, Editions Complexe, Bruxelles 1980.

Michel Vovelle<sup>13</sup>, and Sigmunt Bauman<sup>14</sup> are a major and remarkable source, without which the discourse on Death would lack the fundamental layer of methodology, historiography, philosophy, etc.

### 3. The Absurd, Death and Postmodernity

Introducing the ideas connected with Death into the discourse on the Theatre of the Absurd is only a small contribution to a comprehensive study of the modern drama and cultural changes of our *fin de siècle*. With such rich intellectual heritage and the avant-garde experience of the 1950s and the 1960s, and with the continuous discourse on postmodernism that rolls by like a snowball, one cannot but have the impression of “*speeding up in a vacuum*”<sup>15</sup>, as Jean Baudrillard puts it. At the same time, we seem to forget about the inevitable end. As a result, life becomes more and more secularized, which has been pointed out by the head of the Catholic Church, John Paul II in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope: “Modern man is somehow indifferent to eschatological problems. On the one hand, this indifference is caused by what we call secularization, secularism, and consistent consumerism”*<sup>16</sup>.

Commercialized lifestyle and globalization are other factors that enhance the “*speeding up in a vacuum*”, as well as the *lost identity in time and space where only transformations exist* – as expressed by Jean-Francois Lyotard<sup>17</sup>. It is a range of time and space where only the *hic and nunc* matters, or the ever present “*now*”, which lacks a philosophical distance and eschatological reflection. According to specialists on postmodernism, life enclosed in the “*open time and space*” can only take a dramatic course. This statement seems important as it reveals how dominant the play with the reality is, in which actors take specific roles. It is a metaphor as old as the theatre and the dramas of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Calderon de La Barca, and others.

As Sigmund Bauman points out, a drama does not need to have a fortuitous character, but to actors and spectators it seems much more fortuitous than the reality searched for by Rorty’s ‘naïve realists’ and their followers. It can be dramatic; it can make our hearts beat faster; it can bring about tears. All this, however (actions, emotions etc.) takes place within the theatre and during the performance. There is nothing irretrievable, irrevocable or irreversible about drama. The seemingly irreversible quality of a dramatic play is the play itself, a reliable and, therefore,

<sup>13</sup> See: G. and M. Vovelle, *Vision de la mort et de l'au-delà en Provence du XV au XX siècle*, “Cahiers des Annales” 1970.

<sup>14</sup> See: Z. Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity Press/Blackwell Publishers 1992.

<sup>15</sup> J. Baudrillard, *La Transparence du mal: essai sur les phenomenes extremes*, Galilee, Paris 1990, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Paweł II [John Paul II], *Przekroczyć próg nadziei*, Warszawa 1995, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> See: J. F. Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, Columbia University Press, New York 1988, pp. 31–32.

reversible action. It is a permanent, never-ending attempt at making people and things, our possessions and achievements immortal. It will always be an attempt; it will never be «real»<sup>18</sup>.

Can we say, then, that drama is an unreal attempt only? One should search for the answer not only in the reality of acting. The very core of drama needs to be explored, as well as the mystery of being thrown into existence. What is drama then? It does not matter how many times we ask this question, as every time we are bound to come across the rich heritage of antiquity and our times. We are bound to come across the richness of contribution made by playwrights, theoreticians, philosophers and, most significantly, drama specialists.

One can come up with countless definitions of drama, theatre, and performance. I could mention, for instance, the classical definition of Henri Gouhier, “*a play is the existence made present*”<sup>19</sup> and “*The perspective of every drama ending Death*”<sup>20</sup>.

Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre of Death<sup>21</sup>, which obsessively negates this “existence in the present”, in a way, rejects Gouhier’s definition. The Theatre of Death negates “existence in the present” of a plot, drama, and characters or, as Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz points out, the presence of “the dead preexistence of the performance”<sup>22</sup>. Gouhier’s definition makes it clear that talking about the complicated reality of the play is inadequate and that the phenomena are not expressed clearly enough. There is a certain *ignotum per ignotum* to the issue, too.

Plotinus’, Plato’s and Shakespeare’s metaphors of the Theatre show that our Life is a form of Theatre, and *à rebours*, Theatre is a form of our Life: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women - merely players” (e.g. W. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene 7). However, The Theatre of the Absurd represent the unique metaphor of Life and Theatre, because everything is important there<sup>23</sup>. The primary goal is to give back to the word ‘death’ its appropriate value which refers to man. Understanding death means understanding man as a dramatic being. As such, man lives through the time given to him among other people and with the earth as the stage under his foot<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Acc. to: Z. Bauman, *Śmierć i nieśmiertelność. O wielości i strategii życia* (This section is my translation from the Polish edition by N. Leśniewski), Warszawa 1998, pp. 221–222. [orig. *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* – first published in 1992 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers].

<sup>19</sup> See: H. Gouhier, *L’Essence du théâtre*, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, pp. 15–20.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Tadeusz Kantor – founded avant-garde *The Cricot 2 Theatre* in Krakow. He was a very famous Polish and European performer. His Theatre was called “The Theatre of Death”.

<sup>22</sup> K. Pleśniarowicz, *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora [The Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre of Death]*, Chotomów 1990, p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> M. Maffesoli, *L’Ombre de Dionysos: contribution aune sociologie de l’orgie*, Paris 1985, pp. 16–18.

<sup>24</sup> J. Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu. Wprowadzenie [The Philosophy of Drama. Introduction]*, Société D’Éditions Internationales, Paris 1990, pp. 11–13.

Let us ask a very important question now, how can we talk “for real” about the world if it is permanently dramatic? How can we talk “for real” about drama, Death, about Death in drama in a continuous discourse on truth? Is drama “real”, or is it merely a game played with the reality? To what extent, therefore, can drama reveal the mystery of human existence that leads to Death? These questions are only some of the traps that await anyone who wishes to “digest” and understand the mystery of Thrownness (by Heidegger’s concept: *Geworfenheit*).

No matter how much we would concentrate on the dramatic condition of human existence, on Death taken as the only axiom, understanding the mystery of existence (or the state of being “thrown” into it) will always be connected with the idea of *Sein zum Tode\**. It turns out, however, that an adequate understanding of Death is not possible as Death means ultimate emptiness and nonexistence that, absurdly enough, give birth to all beings. It is necessary to determine the category of the *Ganz Andere* (“*completely different*”) when referring to Death so that we can charge the truth about finality of our existence with a specific meaning. At this point, one could ask an important question: can Death be represented in any way or not?

Edmund Husserl would answer that it is not possible, for Death equals absolute nothingness, and “nothing” has no meaning. So, the perception of the “active subject”, impeded by Death, is impossible. The subject, facing its own limitations, can step into the play of metaphors, as Bauman says. As a matter of fact, metaphor is in the center of our interest, as revealed by the theatre and exemplified by the plays. Our discussion on Death in drama and in the theatre, therefore, may produce the most interesting alternative of the ‘different’, one that is valid in communication between the playwright, actor and spectator, that is, in the relationship between the performer and the observer.

It can be assumed that especially the Theatre of the Absurd acquired the most real, as it is absurd, or the most potential, as it is existential, form of deciphering the complicated code of reality. Is it actually a “valid” code? Certainly, it is achievable as a result of a “dice throw” (Gilles Deleuze claims that a metaphor is a dice throw; one can think here of the following statement of Robert Shaw: “*you do not see anything unless you have got the right metaphor which helps you to see what you are looking for*”<sup>25</sup>).

The main purpose of my paper is to reveal the presence of Death in the Theatre of the Absurd. By doing so, a range of specific ideas and terms should emerge. They can be used in reinterpreting the old, theoretical approach to modern drama and the problem of Death therein.

The term ‘eschatology’, if referred to the Theatre of the Absurd, can easily be abused. One has to keep in mind that the poetics of the works written by major representatives of the genre come from the belief in the existence of the unquestionable ‘Absolute’, equal to Death, for there is nothing that could overturn the laws of biological determinism.

In fact, the creators of the Absurd always revolve around Death, supporting the idea of getting rid of soteriological and transcendent perspectives. The starting point

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted after: J. Gleick, *Chaos. Narodziny nowej sztuki*, Poznań 1996.

of my work is about defining the so called eschatology of the Absurd or “immortality deconstructed”, related to the anthropological aspects of eschatology, concerning the final, ultimate issues important for a human being (on the condition that this “finality” refers to waiting in vain and being on the verge of Death, as exemplified in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*).

The compositional axis of such an approach is based on reflections on the co-called “act of presence of Death and immortality”. Some examples have been taken from plays by S. Beckett, E. Ionesco, A. Adamov, Fernando Arrabal, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Jean Genet, S. Mrożek and many others. At this point, I am confronted with a crucial dilemma. I need to find out to what extent the observations provided by the authors of the absurd are relevant to theoretical, socio-philosophical reflections. And, *vice versa*, in what way are such reflections associated with the experience of the Absurd?

The fifty years that separate our times from the first performance of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* have created a temporal and historical distance helpful in reviewing the historical experience and the cultural and ideological movements of the period. With this experience it is much easier to re-place, as it were, the Theatre of the Absurd in eschatological macrocosm. The idea becomes clear in F. R. Ankersmit’s classification of the period as “post-postmodernist Romanticism”. He declares that Postmodernism is over. The autopsy made on it disclosed the birth of post-post-modernist romanticism<sup>26</sup>.

The “post-postmodernist” or post-narravistic philosophy of history and religion, as well as methodology of sciences and literary theory *par excellence* try to reconstruct the lost meaning. F. R. Ankersmit uses the term *New Sensitivism* in examining this transformation. Thus, getting hold of the transcendent signs and markers, or deciphering the eschatological code in the Theatre of the Absurd, has, in a way, the same value as talking about drama and literature in a “new language”, although, as Theodor W. Adorno reminds us, the darkness of the Absurd is the old darkness of the new. It requires to be interpreted rather than substituted with a clear meaning<sup>27</sup>. Keeping Adorno’s point in mind, it is still useful to search for the primary meaning in what is, according to the authors of the Absurd, seemingly meaningless. Art cannot be about recording the sings of the undermined meaning only. First of all, it should ‘discuss’ meaning. The discussion should be based on ‘the organized meaninglessness’ of art. Adorno illustrates this idea by interpreting Beckett’s plays, *Endgame* in particular. He says that to understand this play means no more than to understand its incomprehensibility<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> See: F. R. Ankersmit, *History and tropology: the rise and fall of metaphor*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994.

<sup>27</sup> See: Th. W. Adorno, *Sztuka i sztuki. Wybór esejów [The Art and arts. Essays]*, translated into Polish by K. Krzemieńczak, Warszawa 1990, p. 252.

<sup>28</sup> See: Th. Adorno, *Próba zrozumienia “Końcówki” Becketta*, [in:] *Sztuka i sztuki...*, op. cit., p. 252.



*Per saldo*, meaninglessness has the value of absolute meaning, which is crucial for the philosophy of the Absurd and a part of the "*quia per absurdum*".

This reflection is immensely rich. In a flash, I have listed the eight most prominent authors of the Absurd. A thorough study of one of them would certainly be an arduous work. Thus, the scope has to be limited to a couple of major works.

As I will try to prove, the definition of the Theatre of the Absurd is the first questionable issue. For example, it is difficult to apply the term to the works of Sławomir Mrożek, whose works have usually been compared to the plays of Beckett and Ionesco. For example – The Polish absurdist characters and the situations which he makes up for them may often seem strange, weird or even Absurd; Absurd in the most universal meaning of the word. The fact that Martin Esslin includes his analysis of Mrożek's drama only in the second edition (1969) of his immense work, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, makes it clear that the renowned critic must have had some dilemmas when classifying Mrożek's oeuvre as belonging to the poetics of the Absurd.

The term coined by Esslin, "The Absurd of the East", is somewhat unclear. I believe that "eastern Absurd" was determined more by politics, the communist experience and especially, Polish national mentality, than by general existential reflection emerging from the "western Absurd". Mrożek himself teases on the subject like a capricious maiden who wants to get on her fiancé's nerves and says, "I have always been boxed with the absurd"<sup>29</sup>. It should be the first step in further exploration and research on the subject, including a range of ideas that had been emerging in philosophy and art not only during the 50s and the 60s, but also those of the earlier period. Moreover, a "*project for the future*", should be prepared to help reach far beyond the framework of diagnoses set up by the critics (such as Józef Kelera, for instance, who would like to see the Theatre of the Absurd as the "artistic development of its own time, that is, of the years 1950–1965"<sup>30</sup>). The diagnosis of such *status quo*, looks fairly relevant: the absurd has been pacified twice – closed in the area of strictly classified dates, names, and titles. It has been analyzed in detail. Interestingly, it is evident that the Absurd helped a number of dramatists to step off the beaten track of conventions and thus, enabled a major breakthrough in the theatre. Who should be

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<sup>29</sup> In this box we can find not only Mrożek but also several playwrights of east European origin. On Esslin's list in *Au dela' de l'absurde* there are, beside Mrożek and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as Witkacy (the latter being the forerunner of the Theatre of the Absurd), the names of Tadeusz Różewicz, Stanisław Grochowiak, and Zbigniew Herbert. It is quite surprising that the list does not include Witold Grombrowicz. In the light of recent studies, he is thought of as the forerunner of Postmodernism. Next, Esslin singles out neighbors of Poland, the Czech playwrights, such as Vaclav Havel, Ivan Klima, Milan Uhde, Peter Karvas, and Istvan Orkeny from Hungary. Obviously, the list is not complete and thus, open for adding on other names. For that reason, codifying and clarifying the definition of the Theatre of the Absurd is rather important. See: *O „Miłości na Krymie” ze Sławomirem Mrożkiem rozmawia Józef Opalski*, in "Teatr", 1994, no. 4, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> J. Kelera, *Panorama dramatu*, Wrocław 1989, p. 124.

given credit for that? This question may be a good starting point for the discussion of the genre<sup>31</sup>. So, let us bring out the most important elements of the Absurd world.

Terry Hodgson's *The Batsford Dictionary of Drama* provides us with the following note on the Theatre of the Absurd: "Theatrical movement which flourished in the 1950s; it is associated particularly with the names of Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, Fernando Arrabal, Arthur Adamov and Harold Pinter. It derives fairly clearly from the dada and surrealist art movements. Its originator was reputedly Alfred Jarry, author of *Ubu Roi (1896)*"<sup>32</sup>. According to the above, the heyday of the genre belongs to the 50s of the last century. Its beginnings, however, can be traced in experiments carried out by the Dadaists and surrealists, who were closely related to Alfred Jarry. As the dictionary informs, "The name absurd derives from one of the central feelings of French existentialism: a painful awareness of the absence of verifiable absolutes in the world. We ask questions of a god who is deaf and does not answer..."<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, Hodgson describes briefly the most important plays: Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Ionesco's *The Chairs*. By doing so, he outlines the range of issues and ideas that are pivotal for understanding the poetics of the Theatre of the Absurd. Overall, beginning with Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism or Søren Kierkegaard's pessimism, and ending with Albert Camus' existential analysis of the Absurd, we can find the base necessary to examine the most profound discourse on human condition; a discourse passed on to us by the dramatists of the Absurd<sup>34</sup>.

Can we say, therefore, that Ionesco's theatre evolved from his obsessions and his inclination to create a new philosophical system; an inclination resulting from anxiety, depression, and frequently manifested hatred of dogma and authority?

As J.L. Styan<sup>35</sup> remarks, Eugene Ionesco (1912–1994) seems to be a better theoretician, than playwright. Like Beckett, he saw the world as something amusing and, sometimes, painful. In his early plays, this contradiction is expressed by illogical strings of words spoken by very stereotypical characters. Although his jokes were lengthy and dialogues somewhat dull, his plays always made people laugh and soon won the audience. Unlike Beckett, Ionesco never hesitated from speaking openly

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<sup>31</sup> See: D.P. Klimczak, *Od patafizyki do metafizyki dramatu i teatru absurdu [From the Pataphysics to the metaphysics of the Theatre of the Absurd]*, "Colloquia Communia", ed. J. Miżińska, K. A. Król, Wyd. A. Marszałek, Lublin 2003, no. 1/(74), pp. 467–498.

<sup>32</sup> T. Hodgson, *The Batsford Dictionary of Drama*, London 1988, pp. 393–394.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 393.

<sup>34</sup> As Nancy Lane points out in *Understanding Eugene Ionesco*, discussing *The Bald Soprano*, "The first place to look for a guide to understanding Eugène Ionesco is in his own writing; there are few writers who have commented as extensively on their own work as he (...). Certain themes surface again and again: his struggle with language; his lifelong obsession with the fundamental issues of meaning, time, death, and religion; his hatred of dogma and antipathy toward authority; his fervent defense of the individual's right to freedom". N. Lane, *Understanding Eugène Ionesco*, University of South Carolina Press 1994, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> See: J. L. Styan, *Modern drama in theory and practice*, Cambridge University Press 1981.

about his intentions, which sometimes reached deeper than his plays<sup>36</sup>. Ionesco aimed mainly at expressing the meaninglessness of life, often by using the character of modern everyman, the “counter-hero”, who in his plays appears as Berenger. Ionesco portrayed tragicomic attempts of somebody who identifies himself with humanity and whose attempts are destined to end in vain.

Let us not forget that Ionesco anticipated Beckett as the author of the first drama of the Absurd after World War II. *The Bald Soprano* was written in 1948 and two years later Nicolas Bataille staged the play in the *Theatre des Noctambules*. The “tragedy of language” produced in this play symbolically illustrates grotesque isolation of the characters and their inability to communicate. Later, Ionesco would proudly say about the drama that he got the idea while leafing through the pages of an English textbook. “*The surreal is right here*”, he said, “*within our reach, in our daily talks*”. As the aforementioned Nancy Lane says, “*Just as in his work, in these interviews impish wit and congenial warm exist side by side with pessimism and despair*”<sup>37</sup>.

Absurd madness, the surreal “here”, tragicomic pessimism find their way to the Theatre of the Absurd through Ionesco, and thanks to him they become present in the works of others. In glorification of the Absurd, in the obsession with the end, Death seems to be just a necessity with no special meaning; it is an inborn element of the temporality of human existence. “*For Ionesco, time is a cancer leading to death, and habit is a gray cover that hides the virginity of the world*”<sup>38</sup>. In his first play of complete acts, *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of it*, we are presented with the dead feeling of a married couple who do not live with each other anymore. This feeling becomes the material from which Ionesco constructs his turpistic and funeral macrocosm; it conjures up the fear of the dead and Death. An immense size of *Amédée's* corpse comically symbolizes aggressiveness that people associate with the dead, especially those that avenge themselves on the people who had brought about their Death, as L. V. Thomas comments<sup>39</sup>. To complete the picture, let us mention the dreadful couplet sung by the senior in *The Chairs*. Taking that into account, can we assume that Ionesco is the author of the Absurd, funeral-eschatological code?

This question recurs when one examines his later works. There, the plot takes on a more traditional form and the characters fit into more realistic space and acting. These transformations are always charged with the inevitability of Death. Cruelty of Death surpasses all nightmares and illusions. *The Killer* (1958) shows ‘the shining city’ where perfect technology has created absolute beauty. In this town, however, a murderer creeps around, killing mercilessly without an end. Berenger resembles

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<sup>36</sup> It became clear that Ionesco had his own version of the absurd when in 1958 he faced an attack from the British journalist, Kenneth Tynan in the “Observer”, who blamed Ionesco’s plays for having no message.

<sup>37</sup> N. Lane, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> See: L. V. Thomas, *La cadavre. De la biologie à l’anthropologie*, Éditions Complexe, Bruxelles 1980. [Polish edition: *Trup. Od biologii do antropologii*, translated into Polish by K. Kocjan, Łódź 1991, p. 57].

one of Charlie Chaplin's heroes trying to fight the murderer who turns out to be a cripple. Instead of replying to Berenger's harangues, the murderer chuckles and pulls out his knife. Berenger's idealism does not shield him from becoming the next victim. Undoubtedly, the recurring motif of Death is pivotal for the eschatological reflection in the Theatre of the Absurd.

The theme of catastrophe and annihilation of the individual recurs in *Exit the King*, in a partly ritual murder of the Schoolgirl in *The Lesson*, in the absurd language of *The Bald Soprano*, or in the famous *Rhinoceros*, (in which the stamping of countless rhinos that can be heard off stage is the most comic and, at the same time, the most horrifying off-stage effect in the entire Theatre of the Absurd, as most critics maintain). What is important to us in reference to Ionesco's Theatre of Death? Jan Kott answered: "We all know that we shall die. But Ionesco knows it even as he eagerly reaches for a menu in a restaurant. Even while he eats, he knows he is dying. Each of Ionesco's doubles, the Berengers in his comedies, knows it too. Not only is death constantly present in everything Ionesco writes, but it is present as dying – one's own and other people's, universal and incessant"<sup>40</sup>. It means, that Ionesco created a macrocsm of eschatology of the Absurd in the modern theatre, especially in the Theatre of the Absurd.

The great developments in the theatre all around the world that have taken place since the first performance of *Waiting for Godot* may be symbolized by the name of Samuel Beckett. These developments evolved from the atmosphere of the period<sup>41</sup>, characterized by moral anxiety and the conviction that "after Auschwitz metaphysics is impossible"<sup>42</sup> (Adorno's famous thesis), the threat of a nuclear war and the existence of totalitarian systems.

Beckett's early dramas convey a farcical diagnosis of existence. Relativism of time and empty space, as well as disconnected plots are most visible in *Waiting for Godot*. One can say that they constitute the very core of the poetics of the genre. Anti-logic, admiration of nonsense and farce, poetic imagery and metaphysics of *reductio ad absurdum* most deeply express the meaning of Beckett's plays. These features are, in Paul Davies' words, the "leaven" of Beckett's imagination and his fictive mind: "But Beckett's artistic characterization of metaphysical issues is anything but slothful, partly because it is so good at dismantling clichés. Although many of his characters are conspicuously apathetic, his art is one of unparalleled alertness"<sup>43</sup>.

The metaphysics of Beckett's dramas and his heroes' symbolism (which he repeatedly stressed and demanded to be present from the directors of his plays; with

<sup>40</sup> J. Kott, *Ionesco, or a Pregnant Death*, [in:] *The Dream and the Play. Ionesco's Theatrical Quest*, ed. M. Lazar, Undena Publications, Malibu 1982, p. 121.

<sup>41</sup> This time had been marked by the first, symbolic performances of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and Ionesco's *Exit the King* (1962).

<sup>42</sup> See: Th. Adorno, *Can one live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. R. Tiedemann, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, pp. 111–125.

<sup>43</sup> P. Davies, *The Ideal Real, Beckett's Fiction and Imagination*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, London–Toronto 1995, p. 22.

*Waiting for Godot*, for example, he emphasized, “Estragon stands on earth; belongs to the stone. Vladimir is light; thinks of heaven; belongs to the tree” – all this outlines a fairly original message of his philosophy, rendering man suspended in space between life and Death).

Symbolism of his characters is enriched by symbolism of objects. Garbage cans (*Endgame*), the huge mount in *Happy Days* are only a few elements that form the metaphor of constant transgression, the purpose of which is unknown. The dynamics of the plot in many of his plays or novels (e.g., *Malone Dies*) results from the confrontation of two values: metaphysical and aesthetic, and from the juxtaposition of life and imagination, ending and acting, linear and circular times. Thus, life gives the impression of being an unrepeated process of ceasing and dying. A man present in this process is one of the objects predestined to the never-ending destruction.

Other authors of the genre, such as Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, or Thomas Stoppard, usually share this point of view. Every one of them took a different path, the theatre they all created is, nonetheless, described as the Theatre of the Absurd or the Theatre of Cruelty, or, most often, the “anti-theatre” or the “counter-theatre”, although it is, perhaps, the most “eschatolotheatrical” (D. K.) one in the whole history of drama.

#### 4. The Phenomenological perspective of The Theatre of the Absurd and the New Sense

What is characteristic of the plays that belong to the Theatre of the Absurd is their minimalism, reduced use of objects and denial of verism in portrayal of characters and in stage setting (which becomes an additional spoken text). These features create a peculiar “metaphysics of codifying”, in which farce and philosophical discourse emerge side by side. Such a solution helps to bring together the antinomies of human existence. As Martin Esslin comments: “Ultimately, a phenomenon like Theatre of the Absurd does not reflect despair or a return to dark irrational forces, but expresses modern man’s endeavour to come to terms with the world in which he lives. It attempts to make him face up to the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant maladjustment and disappointment”<sup>44</sup>. The Theatre of the Absurd, by depicting people who are unfortunate, crippled, lost, or alienated in the society, feeds on clownery, obsession, and perverse imagination which are all aspects of life’s absurdity. It is not only art, but, according to Alan Schneider, a condition of life as well<sup>45</sup>.

The plays of the Absurd also focus on man’s downfall in a sense that a human being has been relegated from subject to object in an industrialized and materialistic world. In this way, the playwrights of the Absurd portray “post-modern models

<sup>44</sup> M. Esslin, op. cit., p. 313.

<sup>45</sup> See: A. Schneider, *Any Way You Like, Alan. Working with Beckett*, “Theatre Quarterly 5”, no. 19, 1975, and E. Brater, *After the Absurd. Rethinking Realism and Few Other Isms*, [in:] *Around the Absurd. Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, Michigan 1990.

of the individual”, one who is devoid of personality and resembles, in Erich Fromm’s words, a “sea anemone”. They do not idealize the reality; on the other hand, they peacefully look at the world devoid of metaphysical basis, meaning or purpose. This *Theatre Nouveau* accounts for somebody who struggles with the absurdity of the world. It is not a medium through which anathemas could be cast upon immorality or cruelties of social injustice done, nor could it bring about a revolution. The authors expressing themselves consistently with the poetics of the Theatre of the Absurd show the dramatic absurdity of the world, considering the Absurd as a “*spiritual suffering that gives birth to man*”<sup>46</sup>. The question is, how can we, in an academic way, classify and bring to the surface this “spiritual suffering”?

This question calls for a specific methodology of research. One that will base this analysis on a literary ground, so that an artistic process can be explained as a specification of the subject matter that would determine the theatrical macrocosm. The method of research that I would like to propose in relation to the Theatre of the Absurd is called a “short collective phenomenological analysis”, that is, the juxtaposition, comparison and generalization of the studied phenomena and their characteristics, with reference to cultural sources. As a result, one should be able to come up with a perfect morphology of the Phenomenon; a profound survey of its origin and structure, shared by many specific, substantial expressions of eschatological and death-related subject matter in the Theatre of the Absurd.

A phenomenological method allows for a shift in the analysis from examining, for example, the corpse in Ionesco’s *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It* (that is, from ethnographic and theatrical descriptions of particular characters or objects) onto a philosophical level on which one can generalize (or, philosophically speaking, “idealize”) and categorize the subject matter. Consequently, crystallization, using Max Weber’s term, of ideal types, funereal objects and the co-called *eschatons*<sup>47</sup>, can be achieved. I would like to add, that the above section (referred to the structural or phenomenological analysis) could be a point of view in separate subjects of research<sup>48</sup>.

They are specifically represented not only by episodes of the plot, stage setting and iconography or the way in which the characters are constructed, *Vorgeschichte* and *Nachgeschichte* of the play, but also by the signs that indicate *reductio ad absurdum* of Death.

Depending on a philosophical practice, one can see two different aspects of the phenomenon of dying, namely, the meaning (German *Sinn*) and significance (German *Bedeutung*) of Death. To give an insightful account of the tragic meaning of Death, one has to bring up the idea of dying as a life-long process (referring to

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<sup>46</sup> A. Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Gallimard, Paris 1942. [Polish edition: *Mit Szyfya* in A. Camus, translated into Polish by J. Guze, Warszawa 1991, p. 9].

<sup>47</sup> *Eschatons* (from the Greek *eschate/on* – final, last) are ideas and reflections on the finality of human existence.

<sup>48</sup> See: D. P. Klimczak, *Death and the Theatre of the Absurd. Thanatological Motifs in the Selected Plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugenio Ionesco and Sławomir Mrożek*, dissertation defended at the Jagiellonian University (Uniwersytet Jagielloński) in Krakow (2004).

the whole life of an individual) and, conversely, of the moment of dying. For dying “as such” it is crucial that life gets more and more empty in time and, consequently, more and more desolate. There is no space to discourse the problem of Death in the sphere of a historical and philosophical reflection, reviewing the prevailing ideas on the problem since antiquity to our times. But, if we include the Theatre of the Absurd in the philosophy of existentialism, probably we would find a critical point for triangulating the Absurd vision of Death on the map of philosophy.

Outlining the eschatological reflection or, just as importantly, the vision of “de-eschatologizing” (Joseph Ratzinger’s term<sup>49</sup> – pope Benedict XVI), is also a major objective of my reflection<sup>50</sup>. It is also important to emphasize two different aspects of dying mentioned above: its meaning and, secondly, its significance.

Examining Death on a phenomenological-existential basis, we will try to find one objective meaning of all the discussed plays, that is to say, their tragic message.

## 5. The details of Death

To demonstrate the tragic meaning of Death in the Theatre of the Absurd, one has to specify the categories of Death, such as: suicide, murder, and *Existence leading to Death* after Heidegger’s *Sein-zum-Tode*. The typical reactions of man to Death, specifically, different types of behavior functions – included in the Theatre of the Absurd (with reference to Camus’ categories, namely: suicide, hope, “the effort of Sisyphus”, rebellion, despair, or Heidegger’s *Existential anxieties / Die Angst*).

Funereal objects, charged with the significance (*Bedeutung*) of Death, are an inherent element of the eschatology of the Theatre of the Absurd. The role is to delineate the macrocosm of the scene (e.g., the catafalque in Genet’s *The Blacks* or in Mrožek’s *Tango*, Arrabal’s *The prayer*), as opposed to the eschatological motifs that outline the macrocosm of the Theatre.

A general analysis of the works within the genre makes it possible to distinguish a particular, funereal landscape that consists, among other things, of the following:

- the grave, reduced to a garbage can or in the form of a huge mount (Beckett’s *Happy Days* and *Endgame*, *Comedy* and other plays),
- the sarcophagus, as a room with no exit (Beckett’s plays, Ionesco’s *Exit the King*),
- the corpse (Ionesco’s *Amédée*, or *How to Get Rid of It*; Adamov’s *La Parodie*),
- the graveyard, reduced to a garbage dump site (e.g., Arrabal’s *The Automobile Graveyard*),
- *danse macabre* (the minuet played at the catafalque in Genet’s *The Blacks*; Mrožek’s *Tango*),
- the coffin and the catafalque (e.g. F. Arrabal, *The prayer*, Mrožek’s *Tango*),
- aspects of agony and elements of funeral ceremony (e.g., Ionesco’s *Exit the King*, Genet’s *Deathwatch*)

<sup>49</sup> See: J. Ratzinger, *Eschatologie. Tod und Ewiges Leben*, 2nd ed., Regensburg 1978.

<sup>50</sup> It can be done, for instance, by analyzing the talk between Vladimir and Estragon.

Funereal objects should be regarded as factors that reduce the meaning of Death *ad absurdum* and reference to the meaning of Death (*Sinn*).

One may wonder whether the authors of the genre made the presence of Death more palpable than ever by deconstructing immortality, transforming life into experience and by giving the absolute meaning to the meaninglessness of Death. How, and to what extent, have they reduced immortality that functioned as a category of eschatological hope? Has immortality become “mortal” in a sense of lacking a vertical base, but having horizontality of action instead? These are starting points (or points of view) in the eschatology of the Absurd created by authors.

How deep is the *Paradox of the strategy of life: Death and immortality* (Bauman’s phrase) rooted in the Theatre of the Absurd? Can we say that Death, as presented by the dramas in question, lacks the significance of dying? How much of the anxiety (*Die Angst*) of Death dissolves or, on the contrary, solidifies through parody and grotesque? These are only some of the questions that need to be asked at the beginning of the Paradox of Death in the Theatre of the Absurd.

The framework for the discussion, as outlined above, allows one to examine the attitude to Death shared by the authors of the Absurd. It originates, first of all, from existential philosophy, which evolves in a consistent and quite original way. Moreover, it derives from a particular theatrical technique that depicts Death and dying with the following tools:

- suspension of the plot in time (*Exit the King*),
- disappearance of “mortal” characters (e.g., Beckett’s *Happy Days* and Ionesco’s *Exit the King*),
- making the space of dying absurd on stage (Beckett’s, Ionesco’s, Adamov’s, Genet’s plays),
- silence; the co-called “tragedy of the worn-out language” (Ionesco’s plays – e.g. *The Bald Soprano*),
- eschatological dialogue (e.g., the talks between Vladimir and Estragon, Nagg and Nell; H. Pinter’s *Ashes to ashes*),
- eschatological perspective (scenography of J. Genet’s *Screens* – from *La Mort* cycle),
- reduction *ad absurdum* of funereal objects (e.g., *Amédée*’s corpse, death of hero N. from Adamov’s *La Parodie*),
- horrors (e.g. A. Adamov’s *Mort chaude* /trans. “Hot Death”/, *La Grande et la petite Manoeuvre* – dramatis persona of play Cripple suffered a terrible fate; Ionsco’s *Lesson* – a teacher killed a schoolgirl),
- the primary topos of Death, eschatological and funereal motifs (e.g., Ionesco’s *Exit the King*, *The Chairs*, *The Killer*, and T. Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, H. Pinter’s *Ashes to ashes*) etc.

These elements arrange the macrocosm of phenomenological perspective of the eschatology of the Absurd.

Also, it would be helpful to characterize the main function of funereal and eschatological motifs. They can be divided into three groups, and within each group



the roles of the motifs can be explained with reference to a specific staging. The main roles are: expressive, semantic, and constructive.

The question of the expressive role involves clarifying the link between funereal motifs and employing objects on stage, movement, light, gesture, and the means of stage expression. In what way, for instance, can the maneuvers on stage make the presence of Death more noticeable and evident? What are the means used by dramatists to surprise the audience, to cause suspense, to control the viewer's emotions and his response to the play? The question of the semantic role will be determined by defining the meaning of funereal objects and eschatological motifs. In what way are they an additional text? What is their meaning within the verbal context of the play? What is, finally, the meaning of a theatrical, funereal sign? The question of the semantic role applies to the distribution of funereal objects within the drama, and to the limitations and the function of this important compositional practice.

A kind of "philosophizing with form" in the Absurd's THEATRUM MUNDI is also to be discussed. The study of this phenomenon as literature, as stage technique, as eschatological elements etc., must proceed from the examination of the works of the Absurd. Besides, one of the major issues of our reflection is the relationship between the authors and their time, considered with reference to eschatological motifs and ideas. In this research – perhaps – we could find the details of Death, probably the perception of Mystery.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article I presented a panoramic research reference to the pattern of eschatological problems in the Theatre of the Absurd.

One should not neglect the fact that the dramatists of the Absurd adopted Georges Bataille's thesis<sup>51</sup> (*L'expérience intérieure*), rejecting salvation and levitating the man of the Absurd instead. Consequently, annihilation of salvation would be considered as the end of eschatological hope<sup>52</sup>.

The Significance of the Absurd is the kind of reflection above the existence. The reality of Death is the reality of our life. Esslin was trying to convince us about the arguments of the Theatre of the Absurd "*To-day, when death and old age are increasingly concealed behind euphemisms and comforting baby talk, and life is threatened with being smothered in the mass consumption of hypnotic mechanized vulgarity, the need to confront man with the reality of his situation is greater than ever. For the*

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<sup>51</sup> See: G. Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, Gallimard, Paris 1979; also: Ibidem, *Erotism: Death & sensuality*, translated by M. Dalwood, 1st City Lights Books, San Francisco 1986.

<sup>52</sup> This notion may be the next step in the study of the problem. In the process of my exploration, I will try to prove the existence of the unique eschatology of the absurd, one that is characteristic for particular authors and, as opposed to it, the general eschatology of the absurd, related to the Theatre of the Absurd *per se* (on the premise, of course, that the former is concerned with the finality of human existence, whereas the latter with the finality of the material world).

*dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions – and to laugh at it*<sup>53</sup>.

The Phenomenon of the Theatre of the Absurd can be traced within the so-called 'open formula'. The range of issues related to the subject is enormous. It can be studied from literary and historical perspectives, but it may also be a part of a larger philosophical discourse concerned with the nature and meaning of the Absurd aspects of human existence. The 'open formula' should not provide a mere analysis of the text; its purpose is to reach mysticism and poetry free from linguistic limitations, for, as Martin Esslin believes, "*As the mystics resort to poetic images, so does the Theatre of the Absurd*"<sup>54</sup>. In this sense, the Theatre of the Absurd is open to languages and other media of artistic expression. According to Anna Krajewska, we are dealing with "*The experience of the world that comes from different cultures; one with a methodological awareness that helps to pinpoint the connection between the drama and the theatre*"<sup>55</sup>. This 'experience' is quite different if we compare, for example, Ionesco and Beckett, but it is shared by all works of the genre and can be investigated in a comparative way, too. It can be called the unique image of Death – an inimitable topos that verifies the *Sinn und Bedeutung* of the Absurd.

At the beginning of our discussion one cannot but think of the words of Ionesco's countryman, Marcea Eliade, who commented on the myths that describe the emergence of Death in the world: Death seems absurd to people, because we are dealing with the transition from 'being to non-being', which seems unacceptable to us, or, in any case, incomprehensible. That is why a comical 'explanation' of the Phenomenon sounds more convincing as it is comically absurd<sup>56</sup>.

It will not be an exaggeration if we associate this most reliable view on Death with the authors of the Absurd. It is the idea of being reconciled with Death; a state that compensates for the fear of Death. A farcical laughter, *lazzi*, *reductio ad absurdum* etc., included in the Theatre of the Absurd, creating the only reality: The MISTERIUM MORTIS (the Mystery of Death).

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<sup>53</sup> M. Esslin, op. cit., p. 314.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 313.

<sup>55</sup> A. Krajewska, *Dramat i teatr absurdu w Polsce [The Theatre of the Absurd and Drama in Poland]*, Wyd. Nauk. UAM, Poznań 1996, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Based on: M. Eliade, *Occultism, witchcraft, and cultural fashions. Essays in comparative religions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1976.

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### Paradoks śmierci i teatr absurdu

#### Streszczenie

Niniejszy tekst poświęcony został funkcjonowaniu toposu śmierci w teatrze absurdu. Temat ten jak do tej pory pozostawał na marginesie badawczych zainteresowań. Przedmiotem analizy, głębszej refleksji uczynił autor wybrane sztuki Samuela Becketta i Eugène'a Ionesco. Uwzględniona została perspektywa fenomenologiczna.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teatr absurdu, eschatologia, śmierć, Sławomir Mrożek, Samuel Beckett

## The Paradox of Death and the Theatre of the Absurd

### Abstract

The aim of the article is the presentation of some interesting and stimulating questions connected with the problem of eschatological codes in the Theatre of the Absurd. The main objective of this paper is to discuss the topos of Death in the Theatre of the Absurd. Because the subject has been underexplored so far, the author tries to triangulate the Theatre of the Absurd within the genre of drama first, and then moves on to the short reflection on chosen plays of Beckett and Ionesco, concentrating on the role that eschatological elements, funereal objects and eschatons play in them. The starting point of this paper could be called "eschatology of the Absurd" or "immortality deconstructed". Meaninglessness, as the value of absolute meaning, the meaning (Sinn) and significance (Bedeutung) of Death in the Theatre of the Absurd, is also discussed. As a method of research, he proposes a short "collective phenomenological analysis". To analyse the issue from a broad perspective, the author takes into account the relationships between the writers and their times, and refers to cultural sources, specifically the Paradox of Death in the Theatre –particularly in the Theatre of the Absurd.

**Keywords:** The Theatre of the Absurd, eschatology, death, Sławomir Mrożek, Samuel Beckett, Eugenio Ionesco, eschatology of the Absurd, Absurdist Misterium Mortis