

Ștefan Afloroaei, *Privind altfel lumea celor absurde*,
Editura Humanitas, București, 2013, 214 p.

Cristinel Munteanu*

Faculty of Communication and International Relations, "Danubius" University, Bd. Galați 3, 800654 Galați, Romania

From the very beginning, the title of Professor Ștefan Afloroaei's book instantly raises in the reader's mind such questions: How should we look *differently* at the world of the absurd? What *different* kind of look is involved here? I believe the title could be reformulated as follows: *Looking Comprehensively at the World of the Absurd*, in which the word *comprehensively* does not only refer to the process of grasping/revealing the meanings of the respective world, but also to the tolerance (or benevolence) towards the "right to meaning" of such a universe. As a matter of fact, this attitude, which characterized the author in all his interpretative demarches, embodied in many books (with topics such as the hypostases of negative reason, "vocation of failure", the "alien" or the representation of the "other", and "the daily metaphysics", etc.).

In his *Foreword*, Ștefan Afloroaei states that he opted for "a rather indirect, speculative look" (p. 10). The term *speculative* is used here "with a simple, almost etymological signification: to look at something as if mirrored, in the mellow light of the remoteness, in order to see both what is equivocal or incomprehensible, the very distance which goes on recovering itself" (p. 10). It is not the rigorous criteria which allow exact analyses of the (so called) "absurd" situations that interest the author, but "rather the place from where ['the meaningless' experiences] could be looked at differently" (p. 10). Certainly, the logical analysis of language would lead to the conclusion that metaphysical ideas, religious visions and many of the texts of artistic literature are absurd or meaningless. Nevertheless (as John Dewey remarked), in the "ocean of meanings", the meanings that we call "truths" (which are already scientifically verified and confirmed) represent but an "island".

What Șt. Afloroaei tries to find out is, on the one hand, whether one can speak meaningfully about

the meaningless and, on the other hand, whether the world can really be divided in two areas: the *meaningful* (cf. Germ. *sinnvoll*), and the *meaningless* (cf. Germ. *sinnlos*) or even the *absurd*. He finds a categorical separation difficult to support: "This is hard to believe. However, I will consider precisely the things that appear strange to meaning in one way or the other, be they sentences, images and ideas, or narrations or happenings. I call them strange to meaning, but sometimes they appear meaningless, some other times opposed to meaning, absurd, and possibly free of meaning." (p. 7). Consequently, experiences which are not perceived by common sense, which shock the thinking itself, are envisaged. At the same time, the author establishes fine distinctions between the terms *meaningless*, *nonsense* and *absurd*. In the case of the word *absurd* (derived from Lat. *absurdum*), Afloroaei draws up a real lexicographical entry (see p. 9), recording the meanings of the term, including their historical evolution (which will clarify the possible sense of some ancient sentences, as found at p. 69–71, for instance).

One can observe that the examples chosen belong either to "the world of word" (problematic texts or sentences), or to "the world of life" (problematic situations and events). They were extracted from some philosophers' pages (such as Cicero and Tertullian, Pascal and Kant, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Wittgenstein) or from some "admirable" writers' pages (such as Kafka and Borges). In fact, Ștefan Afloroaei's analyses are oriented as follows: (i) towards various (apparently) absurd situations or (alleged) meaningless, like those found in the works of the above mentioned writers; (ii) towards (at least) bizarre sentences expressed by some thinkers (see, for example, the sentence *Credo quia absurdum*, traditionally attributed to Tertullian); (iii) towards those philosophers who

*Email address: munteanucristinel@yahoo.com.

proved a certain “appetite” or sensitivity regarding the topic of the absurd/meaningless and, finally, (iv) towards those philosophers who, on the contrary, did not empathise with such a topic (“apparently more sceptical”, as professor Afloroaei categorizes them)¹. Thus, the discussion touches upon both levels: that of facts as such and that of their corresponding reflections.

The book is written in a balanced way, comprising four sections about the same length: *La frontierele celor absurde* [At the frontiers of the absurd] (p. 13–54); *Limite ale comprehensiunii* [Limits of comprehension] (p. 55–97); *Apariții libere ale nonsensului* [Free occurrences of nonsense] (p. 99–143); *Paradox și nonsens* [Paradox and nonsense] (p. 145–196). The symmetry is also obvious in the fact that each section is divided, in its turn, in six subsections, leading to a total of 24 problems discussed. An *Index nominum* (p. 197–200) and an *Index rerum* (p. 201–214) adequately complete the study, enhancing its utility.

The examples chosen and subtly commented by Șt. Afloroaei are captivating. Throughout tens of pages, some texts from Borges (with an emphasis on the hypostases of “the labyrinth” from the latter’s work) are analysed. Kafka is not neglected, either (since the author supports an original interpretation of the difficult text *Before the Law*). Out of the aforementioned philosophers, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are given special attention. The fact that Ștefan Afloroaei tries to justify even the sceptical or refuting attitude manifested by some philosophers concerning the universe of the absurd or of those devoid of meaning is interesting (as in Aristotle’s case, whose intransigence, at times, has to be explained by his aversion towards the sophists’

deviations).

The author confesses (at p. 11) that he owes a lot to the reading of some studies signed by Eugenio Coseriu, Umberto Eco, Arthur C. Danto and Graham Priest. Among them, the most valued seems to be Eugenio Coseriu, judging after the space provided in Șt. Afloroaei’s book to the reproduction of the Coserian ideas regarding the absurd (see mainly p. 134–142). Indeed, Coseriu stated (repeatedly) that if the absurd can be thought, it can also be expressed. He also affirmed that one can rationally discuss about the irrational; one can talk coherently about something absurd (that is why we should say that Eugène Ionesco’s theatre is *a theatre of the absurd* and not *an absurd theatre*). The Romanian linguist proved (frequently) in which circumstances some sentences, considered by logicians as typical absurdities, are, in fact, meaningful, being perfectly acceptable; also the types of discourse where such expressions occur, the procedures through which these expressions are created, etc.

At the same time, I must remark that both Ștefan Afloroaei and Eugenio Coseriu apply the *principle of trust* in their hermeneutical activity, a principle which also involves great generosity for the other’s discourse/text: the interlocutor (even in his dialogue “beyond time”) has to be considered, from the very beginning, a man of good faith, to whom we should grant the “presumption of meaning”; only after the respective speaker betrays our expectations through the nonsense expressed by him, will we take back the granted trust.

I tend to believe that Ștefan Afloroaei is even more generous/tolerant than other interpreters, as proven by subsection no. 10 of his book, which is entitled *Oameni absurzi și idei absurde* (*Kant*)

¹In this context, I would also mention Andrei Cornea’s book, *O istorie a neființei în filosofia greacă* [A History of Nonbeing in Greek Philosophy] (Humanitas, București, 2010), in which the author deals with the ways in which Ancient Greeks treated the problem of nonbeing (of nothingness or of nihilism). As Andrei Cornea demonstrates, the Ancient Greeks manifested three types of attitude in relation with this topic: (1) an *anti-meontological* attitude/vision, (2) a *meontological* one, and (3) an *ontological* one. Briefly, *anti-meontology* bans the discourse about nonbeing, *meontology* (from O.Gr. *mè on* ‘nonbeing’) accepts (and practises) it, while *ontology* completely ignores such a reflection and discussion topic. Mention must be made that meontology is more interested in “secondary nonbeing” (as Constantin Noica called it), and not in “primary nonbeing” (that is nothingness or absolute nihilism). Resuming a clarifying analogy given by Andrei Cornea, *silence* in itself (as *absence* of sound, as well as of music) corresponds to primary nonbeing, whereas the *pause* in a musical discourse corresponds to secondary nonbeing. In semiotics and in linguistics, too, for instance, the so called “zero signs” (as it is the case of the “morpheme Ø” in grammar) belong to such secondary nonbeing. A similar distinction is operated by Ștefan Afloroaei as well when he states in a footnote: “I chose to say «devoid of meaning», not «meaningless», since the meaningless can occur—under certain circumstances—meaningful. On the other hand, something devoid of meaning would place itself beyond the field favourable to the meaningful and to the meaningless.” (Șt. Afloroaei, *op. cit.*, p. 34). I believe that those “devoid of meaning” would fit (in this case) in the sphere of primary nonbeing, while those “meaningless” would fit in the sphere of secondary nonbeing.

[Absurd men and absurd ideas (Kant)]. Here the author comments on some Kantian statements (from Kant's *General Logic*) as follows: "Even if men can commonly perceive something absurd, not everybody is observant to its presence. In such cases, according to Kant, it is not proper to immediately accuse someone, to be blunt in telling him that he did not properly understand it or that he did not express himself logically correct. It would be more appropriate to start 'by making this appearance evident to him'. Reproaching someone the fact that he committed an absurd judgement 'is always a personal reproach which we must avoid'. Provided that person realizes his mistake on his own, then he is a reasonable man. 'If he still abides by his error, then no doubt he is absurd, but then we can do no more with him. He has thereby made himself both incapable and unworthy of all correction and refutation. For we cannot *prove* to anyone that he is absurd; all reasoning would be thrown away on this.' (p. 77)². This, I would say, is a situation in which the principle of trust is no longer applied, a case in which the granted trust was taken back from the interlocutor...

However, Ștefan Afloroaei considers that such a conclusion (although seemingly logical) is "final and

somehow sad, grave" (p. 77). Kant's words regarding "the absurd man" confer Afloroaei the chance to formulate further questions and reflections (which reveal, in fact, his own *modus operandi*): "May any argument be really useless for this man? But is there really such a man? We realize that no one can be considered absurd by nature. And nobody is entirely ignorant of the absurd. In this case, the fact that the philosopher does not add anything else, concerning the above situation, is curious. For instance, he does not say that we should try many times—whenever necessary—to prove the appearance of truth to our interlocutor. Neither does he say that we should see whether he is right or not, both by one of his intentions and by a distinct meaning of the ideas expressed. [...] It would probably be normal to wonder whether the nonsense of his statements is justified or not, whether that nonsense is more eloquent than the meaning offered by common sense on the same topic." (p. 78–79).

Undoubtedly, this excellent book, written by the philosopher Ștefan Afloroaei, is a piece of work abundant in teachings. It is not only addressed to the persons interested in philosophy. I am convinced that, once read, it will bring spiritual benefits, as well as intellectual satisfactions to the educated.

²The quotations reproduced above are extracted from Kant's *Introduction to Logic, and His Essay on the Mistaken Subtlety of the Four Figures*, Translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, With a Few Notes by Coleridge, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1885, p. 47.