

Dis/order as a New Version of the Theatre of the Absurd: Arthur Adamov's *Professor Taranne* as an Example

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□ ABSTRACT □

Western culture was redefined in the light of the calamity of World War II and its atrocities. A sense of senselessness spread out, and meaninglessness possessed meaning – it was an era of chaos, or was it really like that? The consequential European civilization of World War II is more plausibly seen as a synthesis of the antecedents and the aftermath. Europe, at that era, was actually looking back in philosophical curiosity and not in 'anger.' This philosophical attitude led to reevaluations of the relationship between system and chaos on all academic levels, especially in the theatre. A new dramatic genre originated from these sources and delved deep in analyzing their relations, i.e. the Theatre of the Absurd. Such an argument is actually the focus of the current paper, and it is fulfilled through analyzing a sample play entitled *Professor Taranne* Arthur Adamov.

Keywords: The Theatre of the Absurd, Arthur Adamov, Professor Taranne, Chaos, Dis/Order, Orderly Disorder

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اللا/نظام باعتباره إصداراً جديداً من مسرح العبث: مسرحية آرثر أداموف البروفيسور تاران أنموذجاً

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□ ملخص □

أعدت نكبة الحرب العالمية الثانية بكل فظائرها تعريف الثقافة الغربية، فانتشر إحساس من انعدام الإحساس، واستحوذ اللا-معنى على المعاني؛ لقد كانت حقبة من الفوضى، أم هل كانت كذلك حقاً؟ يمكن رؤية الحضارة الأوروبية الناتجة عن الحرب العالمية الثانية بشكل أكثر منطقية على أنها توليفة بين السالف للحرب وعاقبتها، وقد قاد هذا التوجه الفلسفي إلى إعادة تقييم العلاقة بين النظام والفوضى على جميع المستويات الأكاديمية ولا سيما على المستوى المسرحي. إذ نشأ مذهب مسرحي جديد من هذه المصادر ليتعمق في تحليل العلاقات بين الفوضى والانتظام، ويدعي هذا المذهب مسرح العبث. وتأتي هذه المناقشة للأفكار السابقة في صلب تركيز الورقة الحالية، حيث تنجز عملية التحليل من خلال معاينة مسرحية البروفيسور تاران لمؤلفها آرثر أداموف، وذلك باعتبارها أنموذجاً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مسرح العبث، آرثر أداموف، البروفيسور تاران، الفوضى، اللا/نظام، اللا-نظام المنتظم

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I. Introduction

When thinking about the structure of European culture during the twentieth century, the most and foremost event that comes to mind is World War II. That apocalypse spelled havoc all over the continent. Around 60 million souls were annihilated and a trillion dollars was lost in the inferno. These catastrophic losses earned World War II the title of "the bloodiest conflict, as well as the largest war, in history" (World War II). In other words, Europe in 1945 was crawling out of the atrocities of war to face the stage of the aftermath. Chaos is thus the best description of the world during that era, and in that same era, the Theatre of the Absurd started to flourish.

It seems, at this early stage, that the Theatre of the Absurd has come as "a nihilistic reaction to the recent atrocities, the gas chambers and the nuclear bombs of the war" (Styan 125). Nevertheless, Western culture was not literally "nihilistic" in its approach to Absurdism, chaos or to life in general. The reaction was more like in the vein of the modern understanding of chaos as "embodying the loop and cycle of constant generation, degeneration and regeneration" (Demastes xii). This acknowledgment was stimulated by World War II in order to understand the reasons and results of the mayhem and the massive disorder unleashed by that catastrophe. The ground was prepared then to discover the repressed term of chaos, and "our contemporary culture has become obsessed with issues of unpredictability and uncertainty at numerous levels – economic, social, political, spiritual" (Demastes 8). People started to ponder about chaos, order and their relations; they started to question these notions in order to comprehend their nature, causes and effects.

In this light, new insinuations to the old notions of chaos, randomness and absurdity were proposed, and that is the axis around which the current paper rotates. It first examines the relationship and the interaction between the Absurd and its antithesis, i.e. order. It attempts then to establish the latent systematic dimension of the Theatre of the Absurd. That target is actually carried out through the scrutiny of Arthur Adamov's philosophical view, in general, and his play *Professor Taranne*, in particular.

II. Chaos, Order and the Theatre of the Absurd: Critical Background

A good way to start this argument is to follow the same line by resorting to the good old what-is question; what is chaos? Images of randomness, turmoil and pandemonium immediately take precedence. Dictionaries also enroot such a stereotype as is the case with the definition of *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* which describes chaos as "a state of complete confusion and lack of order: economic/political/ domestic chaos" (Hornby 245). Nonetheless, the irony lies in knowing that the original meaning of this word has nothing to do with its modern usage. The etymological meaning of the term under discussion is actually derived from the Greek word "χάος" which is rendered as "abyss . . . a cleft," and the verb is "to gape" (Skeat 84). "[E]mpty space" is another meaning, and it is almost irrelevant to our present understanding (Borror 24).

Accordingly, chaos does not mean chaos; its meaning is rather dualistic and far more problematic. It becomes plausible then to say that this word has two 'incompatible' meanings. The first one is widespread and privileged, while the other is suppressed and almost anonymous. The paradox intensifies even further when noticing that the more neutral, if not positive meaning is not the privileged one but rather its suppressed counterpart.

By the same token, randomness and absurdity suffer from the same paradox. When thinking of the first term of this pair, one of the first words that comes to the mind is

arbitrariness. Its etymological meaning is nevertheless far from being neither random nor arbitrary. The 'other' meanings actually comprise the following range of words: "impetus, violence, force" (Wedgwood 36). Absurdity, in a similar vein, has a yawning gap between its current and original meanings. The first is usually associated with meaninglessness and silliness, while the second surprisingly means being "inharmonious" (Skeat 3). More specifically, inharmony, as "not combining well together or with sth else [sic]" (Hornby 798), is absolutely different from disharmony as "a lack of agreement about important things" (438). This indicates the absence of kinship between meaninglessness and incompatibility, for anyone and at any given moment could stand as inharmonious to a situation s/he faces or even to society as a whole without being silly or meaningless. Such an argument results in a new approach to the vogue of Absurdism after World War II at the philosophical and dramatic levels. The core of my work, as a matter of fact, relies on this view. The Theatre of the Absurd then is not utterly meaningless or purposeless, for prioritizing messagelessness is in itself a message. This trend is therefore more plausibly considered as having its own 'system' that consists of dis/order. Put differently, Absurdism is better analyzed as an orderly disordered genre.

Illuminating such notions, the argument approaches the blend of the two poles, order and Absurdity, into one entity: that of orderly disorder. According to William W. Demastes, chaos and order are two extremes that cannot exist without one another. If the first prevails, it leads to utter bedlam, while the other pole means a complete state of stasis. The ever-changing dynamism of the world belongs to neither and both of these states. It stands midway between the two limits, and that is what Demastes calls orderly disorder. He states, "Between the extremes of order and disorder lies a vast middle realm that embraces a certain stability as it also promotes change . . . Because this stability is temporary and nonlinear, it is not as invariable as order's linearity, but neither is it random as pure disorder is. We have orderly disorder" (Demastes xiii). This new vision to the dynamism of the world does not consider the two poles of chaos and order as being negative. He actually labels the first as "nature's pursuit of patterns of order amid a constant sea/constancy of change and reorder" (xiii). The world accordingly is ruled by a constant state of flux and not by the stereotypical notion of system. It is rather an amalgamation, which consists of dis/order.

With regard to the theatre, Demastes argues that Naturalism epitomizes the systematic causative dimension of the world, while the Theatre of the Absurd stands for the exact opposite. He calls the theatrical form which blends these two extremes together, as in Tom Stoppard's works, the Theatre of Chaos. "Like the chaotic of science," this new form of drama "espouses a vision of dynamic interaction leading to orderly disorder" (xvi). That means, system and chaos, as two dramaturgical forms, cannot be fully explained but in difference to each other, indicating thus their interconnection. Any part of this binary is defined in context and in contrast to its counterpart. Such a mixture is not order, and it is neither disorder. This is what Demastes calls "orderly disorder" but without any reference to Absurd drama. His aforementioned view accentuates the stereotypical accusations of the trend as being "a counterrationalist vision by using a nonrationalist form" (55). Consequently, the argument to be presented in this paper comes as a challenge to this stereotype aiming at presenting the Theatre of the Absurd with what it has been denied: with orderly disorder. The fulfilment of such a plan is accomplished through the discussion of the philosophical world of the famous French Absurdist Arthur Adamov. Theorizations

thenceforth are applied to *Professor Taranne*, one of the dramatist's most accomplished plays, in order to provide a solid illustrative example.

III. Adamov's *Professor Taranne* and Orderly Disorder

Arthur Adamov (1908 -1970) is a French Absurdist playwright of Russian origins. His dramatic career started after World War II. Before that period, his most famous work is his philosophical autobiography *L'Aveu (The Confession)* ("Arthur Adamov"). In his works, one can notice the recurrence of existential syntheses: oneness versus plurality, the individual versus society, order versus chaos, etc. In *L'Aveu*, for example, Adamov states the following, "[W]hat struck me above all were the lines of passers-by, their loneliness in the crowd, the terrifying diversity of their utterances, of which I would please myself by hearing only snatches . . ." (qtd. in Esslin 98). The blend of two opposites is tacitly emphasized in this quotation. The mass and totality of the crowd are set against the 'loneliness' of the individual passers-by, which indicates a simultaneous state of oneness and plurality. Furthermore, the French playwright's awareness of dis/order is also observed in his commentary on his play *Le Sens de la Marche (The Direction of the Marche)*; he states "in this life of which the basic circumstances themselves are terrifying, where the same situations actually recur, all what we can do is to destroy . . . what we consider . . . to be the real obstacle, but what in fact is merely the last item in a maleficent series" (qtd. in Esslin 107). The recurrence of life situations in a series cannot be understood neither as chaos nor Absurdity but as an accentuation of systematicity in its best manifestation, although it is represented as being 'maleficent.' Concentrating on repetitions also signifies Adamov's awareness that life is not purely random, but rather has its own implied patterns. The convergence of order and randomness begets complexity beyond recognition out of which miscomprehension develops, and that leads to a sense of meaninglessness. "Life is not absurd, only difficult, very difficult" (qtd. in Carlson 411), so that the meaning of the world is "of necessity outside the reach of human consciousness" (qtd. in Cornwell 131). Such statements signify, at first hand, Adamov's deep comprehension of the nexus joining opposites together. His understanding of the relation between these poles however goes beyond the traditional contemporary notion of Absurdity, chaos and disorder. The Adamovian worldview is based on the merge of opposites, which leads to the complexity of life, and that renders the universe hazy. Thus, the amalgamation is not only a blend, but also an organized chaos and orderly disorder.

Hitherto, the argument in general has tackled dis/order and the symmetry-based world of Adamov's philosophy. Scrutinizing a tangible example, i.e. *Professor Taranne*, would further illuminate the argument. The structure of the play under discussion does not actually deviate from the overall symmetry involved in the discussion. In two almost identical scenes, the same line of thoughts is repeated twice but in different contexts or attires. Symmetry, as a matter of fact, does not only halt at such a level, but also prevails even at the level of the title of each scene. According to Murat Tulan, "*Professeur Taranne* ne contient que deux tableaux qui portent un nom. Le premier c'est « le bureau de police » et le deuxième « le bureau de l'hôtel »." '*Professor Taranne* consists of only two scenes, and both have titles; the first is 'The Police Office,' and the second is 'The Hotel Office' (4; My Translation). Although the two spaces are different in designation, 'Police and Hotel,' both function similarly as offices. This implies that the change from one place into another is actually static, for it eventually leads to sameness. The re-moulding of space implements the same props in the first scene and rearranges them in the second. That is stated at the very end of Scene One, where stage directions go as follows, "[T]he MANAGERESS

enters left. She moves the chairs and desk a little, takes away the files and brings in a board with keys on it, which she hangs on the wall backstage right. The scene now represents a *Hotel Office* [emphasis in the original]" (Scene One 126). What is emphasized out of this 'pseudo change' is sameness and not difference. In more specific terms, restructuring the stage yields scenic similarity which, in its turn, leads to symmetry on the level of space and ultimately on that of the play too. The other face of the moon, concerning similarity of spaces, is monotony, and this leads to absurdity; how absurd it is to see a static world with almost no difference! The dramatic world of *Professor Taranne* is then more appropriately designated as an Absurd play that is vacant of change and full of void and dullness. Thus, this view of the Absurd results in patterns, symmetry and chaos – it is a two-halves-of-a-whole work of art.

Besides, the characters inhabiting the dramatic realm of *Professor Taranne*, namely Professor Taranne and Professor Ménard, are strangely similar. The two professors, in point of fact, stand in a bizarre correspondence in terms of physical building, profession and the academic topic of their lectures. The similitude of mannerism and physique leads the Smart Woman to mistake the one for the other. The details of this incident go as follows:

SMART WOMAN. Professor, allow me to introduce you to my friends. [Pointing to Professor Taranne] Professor Ménard.

TARANNE. I . . .

[.]

FOURTH GENTLEMAN [almost shouting, leaning towards the Smart Woman]. Come on! That's isn't Professor Ménard. He's rather like him, but Professor Ménard is much taller, well-built . . .

THIRD GENLEMAN. He holds his glasses in his hand . . . like he does. [Laughing] But apart from that! (Scene One 125)

The differences in terms of the two professors' external shape are quite observable, yet they both almost look and act alike. Furthermore, the word 'professor' does ring a bell as well. It is the second part in this odd 'coincidence' of resemblance between Taranne and Ménard; they are both practitioners of the same profession – academic teaching. The third aspect of similarity, as it is aforementioned, strangely enough lies in their topics of study. The same dimensions are actually discussed by both professors, and this is indicated in the letter of rector of the Belgian university at which Taranne is expected to deliver a lecture. The latter avers, "[T]he ideas you [Taranne] express remind me rather too much of Professor Ménard's, which are already highly esteemed" (Scene Two 135). The series of resemblances, at last, comes to an end, yet they result in a recurring question: what is the aftereffect of the present argument?

Establishing a state of orderly disorder as a result of the general perspective of the argument associating Taranne and Ménard together is plausibly the answer. With the Smart Lady's mistake in mind, similarity is not a vindication: this is rather symmetry and character-related order. It is a systematic world inhabited by two parallel characters due to their correlation. However, alongside the prevalent correspondence, the dimension of latent difference gradually starts to manifest. The general stature, for instance, is convergent in both characters, yet Ménard is "taller, well-built . . ." (Scene One 125). Their lectures as well bear a strong resemblance, but this academic correlation is presented in the form of unlawful appropriation whose perpetrator is not fully asserted by the plot of the play. Incongruities thus start to grow alongside resemblances, and a state of balance between

opposites ensues veering together towards orderly disorder. Both characters are simultaneously similar and different, interrelated and unrelated, and antagonistic inhabitants of the same dimension. The level of characters, in this respect, exhibits an indirect-two-way relationship of correspondence and disparity in *Professor Taranne*.

Moreover, the level of language is also significant and displays a pattern of its own. A high frequency of repeated assumptions is faced by a series of undercuts. Taranne always claims being a highly esteemed professor, but other characters, in most cases, are indifferent to all his allegations and personality. For example, the following dialogue depicts this situation:

TARANNE. [. . .] But gentlemen, you can't not recognize me; it's impossible. I am . . . Professor Taranne.

FIRST GENTLEMAN [slowly as if trying to remember]. Taranne? (Scene One 123)

This is an instance out of several others where the protagonist's allegations about his superior status are gone with the wind, and by virtue of the frequency of repeating this self-assertion-undercut incident a pattern is created. Tulan follows a similar approach suggesting that no matter how hard Taranne tries to prove his innocence, no one listens to him. He says, "[C]ela met en place la situation du Professeur Taranne, cherchant à faire comprendre aux auditeurs indifférents à lui-même qu'il n'a jamais commis un tel crime . . . Mais nous y'avons tous constaté qu'il se montre comme un homme qui n'est pas pris au sérieux" "[T]hat puts the situation in *Professor Taranne* in its right place; he tries to make the listeners, who ignore him, comprehend that he has never committed such a crime . . . Nevertheless, we all have observed how he is shown as a man who is not taken seriously' (15; My Translation). Recurrence, in this light, transforms the protagonist's assumptions almost into refrains and the responses into nearly preordained foreshadowing. He always introduces himself as an esteemed and famous scholar only to be greeted by other characters' negativism and indifference. Peter Norrish examines the spoken-word-reaction dichotomy as well, yet his result muffs the implied symmetry in Adamov's work. He maintains instead, "[T]he contradiction between words and acts . . . was a part of observed reality which might give rise to laughter" (92). Laughter is only an aspect of the repetitive investment of the word-deed equation. It also results in the dimension of almost fixed models where the same input used with variegated members yields almost the exact results. Accordingly, the level of language in *Professor Taranne* is suitably designated as a patternistic dichotomy of assumption and reaction.

After capitalizing on the individual aspects of symmetry and order in the work under discussion, the focal point of emphasis shifts to the plurality of the finale: the protagonist's willing act of nudity after denying doing so throughout the play. Several analyses scrutinize the last moment in *Professor Taranne* proliferating thus the possible valid interpretations of the course of actions, yet the scope of the research accommodates a smaller amount of the most peculiar interpretations for the sake of structuring a clear perspective of the problem. Carlos Lynes, Jr, for example, concentrates on the psychological pressure of pretension on its own practitioner. He maintains, "we have the direct, dramatic revelation of a man unable to live up to the public role which has fallen to his lot . . . [and his] fear of exposure has preyed on his mind to the point of unbalancing his reason" (53). Catherine Bicknell, on the other hand, considers the finale as an act of resistance in reverse, as if Taranne challenges society by undressing, as if he says: you accuse me of stripping naked; you get what you want; I will undress. The act of nudity, for her, comes as "one of both rebellion and acquiescence in regard to a hostile world which has divested him of his dignity" (262). Undressing is then an equivoque, for it affirms the

accusation and defies society and its rules at the same time by committing a prohibited act. Albert Bermel's interpretation, on the contrary, adopts the protagonist's version of the story. It suggests that "Taranne may after all be the celebrity he claims . . . [and] the summit is a precarious position to occupy – one can easily topple or be pushed or shot down from that conspicuous peak by deserving or undeserving rivals" (160). This line of argument accordingly justifies all mystery of the play yet on the basis of conspiracy theory. Taranne then is an esteemed scholar, as he really declares, and Ménard is the copycat who takes the honour of the protagonist's research. Such a quick survey therefore highlights that all these plausible explanations depend on valid aspects of the play, but the lacking element is the unequivocal evidence. In other words, they provide different illuminating perspectives for the same idea and complicate the process of formulating a clear analysis. Consistency is then sacrificed for the sake of augmenting the state of unpredictability, uncertainty, and open-endedness. Thus, the richer the analyses are, the greater the proliferation is, and the lesser the sense of systematicity.

The line of argument, at this stage, ends up with the last action on stage, namely with Taranne stripping out of cloth. The consideration of this dramatic act of nudity and its aesthetic importance in the light of Absurdism and orderly disorder comes then as an illumination of the discussion. It is considered as truth; this is how Taranne's naked body is approached by most scholars, yet what is truth? Is it his truth of being fake? Is it an act of internalization? Is he rebelling against society? Many questions are raised, and they are all supported and acknowledged by the text. Humans are obsessed with the question 'why?' seeing riddles that need solutions everywhere they look. It is that human trait which the Theatre of the Absurd emphasizes: humanity's search for truth. The quest, for Adamov, is inevitably impossible and unavoidable; we are, as he suggests, "caught in the dilemma of being aware that it is impossible to find it [truth], and yet also impossible to renounce the hopeless quest" (qtd. in Esslin 97). In this respect, truth, for the French dramatist, is never complete but partial, and *Professor Taranne* is a perfect example of this view. A comprehensive reading of the last words before the curtain, "Professor Taranne . . . very slowly begins to take off his clothes" (Scene Two 137), does not suggest complete nakedness but rather partial. In other words, the play intentionally halts where nothing is completely revealed and where the audience is left waiting for and pondering about the revelation of the 'hidden' part. The finale, when approached thus, accords with Adamov's view of truth suggesting that nothing is complete, and no answer is to be 'waited for.'

The corollary of the previous notion is also reflected at the level of structure, for *Professor Taranne*, as an Absurd work of art, is abundant with two coexistent elements: structured patterns and open-ended questions. On the one hand, the protagonist voices out the unique recurrence of events and actions when he says, "[O]f course it may seem odd that the same thing should happen again a few days later. But if you really think about it . . . Things always happen in a series. It's strange, but . . . it's a fact" (Scene Two 128). On the other hand, the very same character cries out to his sister, "Jeanne, the most extraordinary things are happening to me" (Scene Two 132). The play then hosts the pattern and its opposite.

IV. Results and Conclusions

The previous result corresponds with orderly disorder because the systematic route of the play reaches no ultimate conclusion but unpredictability. In other words, system, symmetry and patterns pervade a variety of aspects in *Professor Taranne*, as it is previously discussed. Nonetheless, mysterious points remain vague, and open-endedness, as a chaotic phenomenon, seals the end of the play. Mirela Helberi voices the same opinion yet in

relation to the Professor stressing that "sont porteurs de maintes informations psychologiques, relationnelles et sociales, pourtant, le doute ne cesse de planer sur l'identité du protagoniste" 'his discourse carries plenty of psychological, relational and social pieces of information. However, doubt never ceases inhabiting the protagonist's identity' (124; My Translation). The end itself epitomizes this synthetic state; it is half-revealing and half-concealing, half-known and half-unknown, half-orderly and half-disorderly. Accordingly, repetitions or patterns, in spite of their systematic nature, do not order the play and fail to stabilize its end.

Models then, as a result of building up the whole argument, lead to no system but that of randomness, plurality and open-endedness. Chaos and order melt together moulding a synthetic entity. The Theatre of the Absurd, in this light, is Absurd only in its own systematic methods. The consequence of all these postulations dawns as the restless quest for a reassuring explanation is never complete; that is the answer; that is orderly disorder.

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