

The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd. By MICHAEL Y. BENNETT. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2015. x+168 pp. (pbk x+163). £54.99 (pbk £17.99). ISBN 978-1-107-05392-2 (pbk 978-1-107-63551-7).

In his latest book, Michael Bennett sets out to provide a scholarly but reader-friendly appraisal of the literary and dramatic manifestations of the absurd. After re-interpreting Albert Camus and re-evaluating Martin Esslin's inescapable legacy (by downplaying the perceived pessimism of his reading), Bennett puts forward a working definition of absurd literature, which in turn legitimises his choices related to his absurdist corpus and canon. Then, having described the economic and cultural context surrounding the emergence of what Esslin termed the 'Theatre of the Absurd', Bennett proceeds to discuss the work of some key practitioners of the absurd, with Samuel Beckett functioning as the understandable epicentre of his analysis, though reference is also made to writers that belie the widespread but inaccurate idea that the absurd is homogenous in terms of race, gender, generation or even literary tradition. In the last section, Bennett briefly comments on the abrupt rise, steady fall and recent revival of absurd criticism.

Bennett seeks to provide the reader with '*the tools to (re)interpret these literary works in varied and exciting ways*' (p. 9, original emphasis), but it is not clear how this avowed aim is carried out. Bennett claims that it is achieved due to the antipodal nature of his reading in relation to Esslin's, which means that they 'ultimately cancel each other out' (p. 17), though this argument presupposes a rather simplistic view of how ideas are exchanged. In lieu of 'tools', then, we find the statement that absurdist texts *can* be interpreted in ways that run contra to Esslin, a notion that is certainly worth stressing.

Indeed, this book's most interesting insights concern the general concept of the absurd. Though rightly acknowledging the importance and influence of Esslin's thesis, Bennett is adamant in his affirmation of the '*positive, life-affirming*' side of absurdism (p. 17, original emphasis), a perspective that is both sensible and sorely lacking in most absurd criticism. Bennett's account of the complex relationship between the absurd and existentialism is noteworthy, as is his insightful assertion that, far from being 'no longer relevant', the absurd 'has simply become a part of our literary imagination' (p. 21).

He also proposes a structural definition of absurd literature, which is neatly divided into four 'common threads' (p. 19). It follows naturally from his criticism of Esslin's 'reductionist' thematic reading (p. 7), and it is bold and sound in equal measure. It must be said, however, that the resulting thematic vacuum looms large, and is implicitly addressed in the vaguest terms possible, namely in the 'common thread' concerning the 'strangeness' of absurd literature (p. 7). In addition, Bennett's thorough attempt to distinguish between Esslin's 'labeling' and his own 'grouping' (p. 7) is more semantically ingenious than actually persuasive.

The economic context is perhaps the most problematic part of this book. Bennett's doubtful claims – such as his repeated insistence on the immediate, almost magical effects of the Marshall Plan in the post-war zeitgeist – seem to serve the sole purpose of rationalising an optimistic interpretation of the Theatre of the Absurd. Other possible weaknesses may be observed in the otherwise competent case studies, but most of them are either minor, inevitable (the case of notable absences, like the surprising fact that Daniil Kharmis is hardly discussed even though so many of his texts are perfect for Bennett's parabolic reading), or glaring but predictable (such as the book's Anglocentrism, with Edward Albee and Tom Shepard being discussed in much more detail than Eugène Ionesco).

On the whole, however, this book manages to be both an accessible introduction to readers unfamiliar with the absurd and a thought-provoking addition to absurd criticism.

Pedro Querido

Centre for Comparative Studies, School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon
Rua Marques da Silva 48, 4 FRT
1170-225 Lisboa, Portugal
pedro_sq@hotmail.com