

From Kharms to Camus: Towards a Definition of the Absurd as Resistance

‘Go and stop progress’.

Kazimir Malevich to Daniil Kharms¹

These days, the philosophical and metaphysical concept of the absurd enjoys a less than stellar reputation. Not that it ever had widespread appeal,² but the years have not been kind to it. A brainstorming session on the most common associations with absurdism would surely yield the likes of ‘bleakness’, ‘pointlessness’, and ‘despair’. Frequently conflated with nihilism,³ it is routinely assumed to be some sort of conceptual wasteland fraught with moral relativity⁴ and plagued by an inescapable sense of sterility, one heightened by its ‘built-in obsolescence’⁵ and its hopelessly paradoxical nature.⁶

The literary and dramatic counterpart of absurdism – and here the emphasis rests

¹ In Matvei Yankelevich, ‘Introduction: The Real Kharms’, in *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, ed. and trans. by Matvei Yankelevich (New York, Woodstock, London: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), pp. 11-40 (p. 25).

² Arnold Hinchliffe, *The Absurd* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 45.

³ Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 4.

⁴ Hinchliffe, *The Absurd*, p. 37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

heavily on the works famously grouped together by Martin Esslin under the eclectic banner of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' – seldom fares much better. Dismissed as acolytes of 'a ferociously avant-garde movement with an exclusively existential vision',⁷ the Western practitioners of the Theatre of the Absurd are often deemed to be 'deeply steeped in despair and pessimism [... ;] the European absurdist sees life as being absurd and meaningless, so absurd and meaningless in fact that he contemplates suicide as a solution'.⁸ This would seem to explain why some East European theatre critics find 'the Western absurd play' to be lacking in the department of social responsibility.⁹

This article does not set out to deny the indisputable nihilist streak which underlies absurdist thought. Rather, its first main aim is to dispel the myth that a preoccupation with the absurd necessarily leads to apathy, lethargy, and an acute sense of helplessness. To name but one possible example, it is often too readily presumed that Jean Paul Sartre's later emphasis on the importance of social and political awareness resulted from an *abandonment* of absurdity as opposed to being a logical next step.

However, absurdism, it will be argued, is much more than a self-indulgent dirge for the living. It comes from a deep-seated unrest, and it reacts to perceived transgressions. It packs a very powerful punch, and this force need not be simply

⁷ Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1991), p. 377.

⁸ Odun Balogun, 'Characteristics of Absurdist African Literature: Taban lo Liyong's *Fixions – A Study in the Absurd*', *African Studies Review*, 27 (1984), 41-55 (p. 46).

⁹ Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, 'The Metamorphosis of the Theatre of the Absurd or the Jobless Jester', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 7 (1972), 54-64 (p. 57).

channelled through and presented in its raw form, as is frequently deemed to be the case in the West: it can also be instrumentalized ‘constructively’ by being subordinated to ulterior goals, as examples from Africa and Eastern Europe show us. In a word, then, the argument is that it is impossible to make sense of the absurd in all its philosophical and literary manifestations without taking stock of its attritional character – be its resistive force steered against death, modernity, totalitarianism, colonialism, or simply the status quo.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE ABSURD

In his book *The Absurd in Literature*, Neil Cornwell mentions different possible definitions of the absurd. On the one hand, the absurd can be regarded as a theme, a ‘timeless disposition or quality, which may be seen to pertain – at the very least here and there – throughout the history of literature, and certainly from some of the works of the Greeks’.¹⁰ On the other hand, it may very well ‘be considered a prominent period style, observable in the second half of the twentieth century’,¹¹ and Ramona Fotiade does not mince her words when describing its importance: ‘The twentieth century might, with hindsight, be described as the conflicting site of successive avant-garde waves that bear witness to the presence of a single unifying, pervasive concern with the Absurd’.¹²

This concern is manifest in the many literary works it spawned. These works

¹⁰ *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 311.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 310-11.

¹² *Conceptions of the Absurd: From Surrealism to the Existential Thought of Chestov and Fondane* (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), p. 1.

appeared to share ‘a certain vision of the world and of the laws which govern it, a certain linguistic rapport’ and to ‘resemble each other in a striking manner, even when their authors could not have known or read one another, whether for reasons of language or of temporal distance’.¹³ Noticing how many of them were written for the stage, Esslin, ‘having appropriated the concept of the absurd in the first place from Camus’, chose ‘to apply it to what he identified as a new theatrical trend’:¹⁴ the Theatre of the Absurd. This notion has been as influential as it has been controversial, but even some of the more sceptic critics have admitted that Esslin’s premise has a solid footing.¹⁵

Having said that, it must be pointed out that the absurd remains ‘a disposition rather than anything approaching an overall concrete twentieth-century movement’.¹⁶ Esslin was careful to stress that the dramatists discussed in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* ‘do not form part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement’,¹⁷ as the essence of the Theatre of the Absurd ‘lies in the free and unfettered exploration by each of the writers concerned of his own individual vision’.¹⁸ This freedom contributes to the notorious elusiveness of the absurd; claiming that absurdity is

¹³ Jean-Philippe Jaccard, ‘Daniil Kharmis in the Context of Russian and European Literature of the Absurd’, in *Daniil Kharmis and the Poetics of the Absurd: Essays and Materials*, ed. by Neil Cornwell (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), pp. 49-70 (p. 49).

¹⁴ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 310.

¹⁵ Hinchliffe, *The Absurd*, p. 92.

¹⁶ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 99.

¹⁷ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1962), p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

‘a relative not absolute notion’¹⁹ is almost an understatement. The absurd resists taxonomies, and so do absurdist works: ‘[t]he concept of “literature of the absurd” is extremely vague and often permits the ranging under the same term of a whole series of disparate works which often have no common denominator but their obscure nature’.²⁰

Besides from obscure, some critics seem to consider such works aloof to the point of solipsism. It is not too hard to understand where they are coming from: existentialism, ‘not a philosophy but a type of philosophy’ both very flexible and ancient²¹ which is the driving force behind many absurdist works – but, crucially, not all of them, as we shall see when we discuss Kharmis – ‘concerns itself first and foremost with the subject, rather than the object’,²² and this promotes inwardness; moreover, ‘[t]he emergence of the preoccupation with the absurd in the early twentieth century can also be associated with the steady rise of nihilism in Europe’.²³ Thus, in Hinchliffe’s opinion, ‘Absurd Theatre is timeless, universal, and philosophical’, as opposed to ‘topical, particular, and political’.²⁴

That presumed detachedness probably plays a role in the way those works’ tone is

¹⁹ Hinchliffe, *The Absurd*, p. 90.

²⁰ Jaccard, ‘Daniil Kharmis in the Context of Russian and European Literature of the Absurd’, pp. 49-50.

²¹ John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 15.

²² Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 5; see also Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology*, p. 16.

²³ Fotiade, *Conceptions of the Absurd*, p. 3.

²⁴ *The Absurd*, p. 4.

often interpreted as being ‘ridiculous, if not downright comical’.²⁵ The ‘black humour’ so commonly associated with the practitioners of the absurd²⁶ is often somewhat heedlessly mistaken for sheer nonsense, but Cornwell draws a clear line between nonsense and the absurd: ‘The basic difference may be that pointlessness as the point of nonsense is essentially non-serious; pointlessness as the point of the absurd, however, is (potentially, at least) altogether more serious’.²⁷

This seriousness is crucial for a proper understanding of the absurd, and it flies in the face of charges of apathy or aloofness. In fact, according to Esslin, ‘[t]he Theatre of the Absurd forms part of the unceasing endeavour of the true artists of our time to breach this dead wall of complacency and automatism’.²⁸ Such aims in no way run counter to the philosophical framework of the absurd, as introspection and self-awareness must not be confused with inwardness and passivity. Existential thought provides a useful analogy:

In existential thought, resignation does not primarily refer to a disengagement from social and political commitments insofar as they relate to outer rather than inner determinations of thought. Resignation more adequately designates what seems to be the only sensible attitude when man comes to confront the implacable truth of human mortality.²⁹

²⁵ Marc Blanchard, ‘Goodbye, Sisyphus’, *South Central Review*, 15 (1998), 8-18 (p. 11).

²⁶ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 84.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁸ *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 291.

²⁹ Fotiade, *Conceptions of the Absurd*, p. 77

Yet, as will be argued later on in this article, even in this qualified sense ‘resignation’ is almost unfailingly too strong a word for any absurdist worth their salt. ‘Ultimately’, argues Esslin, ‘a phenomenon like the 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’.³⁰ After all, deciding to face head-on the prospect of living a frail and fleeting life in a chaotic, even hostile universe is hardly synonymous with defeatism.

Far from meekly accepting their cruel fate, then, absurdist artists, like any other artists, cannot truly accept that powerlessness is the sole defining feature of human life – otherwise why would they keep creating art at all? Absurdity cannot be reduced to the awareness of a particular state of affairs; it is also, in its very essence, a call to action. This is best exemplified by its indelible connection to the twentieth-century avant-garde movements: Cornwell draws attention to the fact that the avant-garde, an indissoluble ‘aspect of modernity and modernism’ which made up ‘the building blocks of the absurd’, did not just provide a laboratory for experimentation with new artistic forms, but also fiercely ‘stood for revolt against tradition’.³¹

Here it is important to make a distinction between the thesis presented in this article and previous attempts – notably by Robert Brustein and George Wellwarth, both writing in the 1960s – at defining the works of Beckett and likeminded playwrights as being motivated by ‘protest’ or ‘revolt’. Though on the face of it germane to the concept

³⁰ *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 313.

³¹ *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 74.

of the absurd as resistance, the interpretations devised by Wellwarth and Brustein fail to account for the thematic richness and complexity of many of the writers discussed in this article.

Wellwarth enticingly begins his book *The Theater of Protest and Paradox* by arguing that the plays written after WWII share ‘a common theme (protest) and a common technique (paradox)’,³² but unfortunately, as Michael Y. Bennett notes, this point is never properly addressed later on.³³ Instead, Wellwarth seems to regard modern dramatists as nihilists whose bleak views sport varying shades of obstinacy. For example, he claims that for Beckett – the ‘prophet of negation and sterility’ who preaches ‘intellectual nihilism’³⁴ – ‘all knowledge is an illusion’, thought ‘is useless’, and ‘the concerns and actions of human beings are meaningless’.³⁵ The logical implication of this worldview, and of Wellwarth’s appraisal of avant-garde drama as ‘the comedy of nihilism and despair’,³⁶ is that the playwrights’ ‘protest against the social order and the human condition’³⁷ cannot amount to much more than a sterile paroxysm.

Similarly, Brustein’s analysis of modern theatre as one of revolt would seem to be

³² *The Theater of Protest and Paradox: Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. x.

³³ *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 20.

³⁴ *The Theater of Protest and Paradox*, pp 51, 41.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

perfect for the topic at hand. Indeed, this article explores or at least corroborates several points already raised by Brustein, such as: the Romantic influence on that attitude of revolt;³⁸ the artists' indebtedness to the Nietzschean idea that 'the only alternative to nihilism lay in revolt';³⁹ the crucial suggestion of the impossibility of resigning oneself to the absurd;⁴⁰ and the equally vital use of the keywords 'ambivalence', 'tension', and 'conflict' when describing 'the central dialectic of the modern drama'.⁴¹ However, Brustein's thoughtful study is marred by his brief and offhand account of 'the absurdists',⁴² the ragtag group of writers who 'never stray too far from the limits laid down by Dada' (which limits would those be, one wonders) and whom he denies the honour of belonging to his main corpus. Purporting to channel Artaud, or at least anchoring his judgement on the French writer's vision, Brustein considers Beckett to be 'too wan and listless', Ionesco 'too frivolous', and 'the rest of the "theatre of the absurd" [...] too nihilistic'.⁴³

However, it would surely be worthwhile to rehabilitate the very valid notions of 'protest', 'paradox', and 'revolt' as applied to twentieth-century theatre – perhaps not necessarily focusing on drama alone but instead contemplating the diverse philosophical ideas and literary genres related to the absurd – in light of more recent readings of the

³⁸ *The Theatre of Revolt*, p. 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 377.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

practitioners of the absurd as being altogether more sanguine and constructive, of which Bennett is the latest and most vocal proponent.⁴⁴ Bennett rightly contends that absurdist works teach us that ‘it is up to us, through our defiance, revolt, and contemplation, to make our lives meaningful’.⁴⁵ This statement strikes a fine balance between expressing outrage over one’s absurd condition or circumstances and steering it towards a positive outcome.

However, for the most part Bennett downplays or even neglects the element of revolt and resistance.⁴⁶ Instead, he concentrates his efforts on demonstrating his belief in the upbeat nature of absurdist works.⁴⁷ This is well illustrated by his serious attempt to

⁴⁴ Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*. See also Michael Y. Bennet, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴⁵ *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ Although sometimes it surfaces in unexpected ways, as when Bennett rather originally and certainly defiantly sees in absurdist works a ‘revolt against existentialism’ (Ibid., p. 2). Bearing in mind the actual tenets held by prominent self-proclaimed existentialists (see for example *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Audi, third edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 343-44), this claim perhaps presupposes that here and elsewhere the term ‘existentialism’ be read (as is often the case in everyday usage) as a byword for nihilism.

⁴⁷ This hypothesis, according to Bennett, serves as a foil to Esslin’s supposedly ‘bleak’ views, which lead one to read the plays he analyses as being suffused with ‘a sense of hopelessness’ (*Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 16). This not wholly inaccurate

rationalise such a decidedly optimistic reading by leaning on the allegedly hopeful mood of postwar Europe due to the Marshall Plan and the ‘incredible economic growth’.⁴⁸ This article proposes to meet these three critics halfway by taking the line of thought initiated by Wellwarth and Brustein in the more positive direction indicated by Bennett, without losing sight of the momentous importance of the idea of revolt.

But what is the exact nature of such revolt? Addressing this knotty issue is the second main aim of this article. As we shall see, there are as many answers to this question as there are artists who could be considered ‘absurdist’. Nevertheless, all of those individual revolts have a common spring in a few world-changing historical developments.

2. A BACKGROUND: ON MODERNITY, REASON AND FAITH

The absurd is a key aspect of modernity.⁴⁹ But to what extent is it a *part of* it, and to what extent is it a *reaction to* it? Any attempt to truly grapple with this question ought to be preceded by an explanation of what is meant by ‘modernity’. This article, however, is only tangentially concerned with this famously slippery concept, and therefore no attempt will be made to actually define modernity. Instead, the emphasis will lie entirely on modernity’s slightly less controversial philosophical origins.

but decidedly simplistic interpretation, though rife in absurd criticism, fails to do justice to Esslin’s more nuanced thesis (see for example *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 313).

⁴⁸ *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 16; see also *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, pp. 36-38.

⁴⁹ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 74.

Modernity is inextricably linked to the Enlightenment. Anthony Pagden argues that '[m]odernity was the creature of a great many intellectual and scientific configurations, from the invention of the steam engine to the Internet, very little of which can be attributed to the Enlightenment'; 'What can be attributed to it, however, is the broadly secular, experimental, individualistic, and progressive intellectual world that ultimately made those innovations possible'.⁵⁰ The Enlightenment, then, 'was the true beginning of modernity, as an open-ended, continuing progression, subject to constant scrutiny and reevaluation'.⁵¹ Jonathan Israel, author of several works on the Enlightenment, fully concurs: 'The Enlightenment, I maintain, was the most important and profound intellectual, social, and cultural transformation of the Western world since the Middle Ages and the most formative in shaping modernity. [...] The product of a particular era, it has profoundly affected every aspect of modernity'.⁵²

There is one particular aspect of the Enlightenment which is of vital importance for this article: its emphasis on Reason. Israel argues convincingly that the 'interlocking complex of abstract concepts' associated with the 'making of modernity' is 'predominantly (but not exclusively) derived from the Radical Enlightenment'.⁵³ This is

⁵⁰ *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. viii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵² *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights 1750-1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 3.

⁵³ *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 52.

not immaterial for future absurdists, given ‘the Radical Enlightenment’s complete elimination of theological criteria and unrestricted application of reason to everything we know’.⁵⁴ As a result, the Enlightenment would be defined by its promotion of a ‘fundamental belief in the power of reason’, which ‘would free humankind from ignorance and superstition’.⁵⁵ Thus ‘[m]odernity and rationality are interconnected in a conceptually compulsory manner in that both notions stand in an intrinsic and internal relation to one another’, so much so that, for Jürgen Habermas, ‘postmodernism, as a farewell to modernity and its discourse as a whole, would of necessity represent a departure from rationality’.⁵⁶

Little wonder that when, in the second half of the twentieth century, some Western scholars pounced on what they perceive as the dark side of modernity, ‘Reason’ too became a target. Israel summarizes this development in an illuminating passage worth quoting at length:

Meanwhile, a growing tendency, from the 1970s onwards, to contest the validity of the ‘Enlightenment’s’ ideals and see its laying the intellectual foundations of modernity in a negative rather than a positive light has, at the same time, caused

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Andrew Koch, ‘Rationality, Romanticism and the Individual: Max Weber’s “Modernism” and the Confrontation with “Modernity”’, *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique*, 26 (1993), 123-44 (p. 123).

⁵⁶ Rodolphe Gasché, ‘Postmodernism and Rationality’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 85 (1988), 528-38 (p. 528).

an escalating ‘crisis of the Enlightenment’ in historical and philosophical studies. In particular, Postmodernist thinkers have argued that its abstract universalism was ultimately destructive, that the relentless rationalism, concern with perfecting humanity, and universalism of what they often disparagingly called ‘the Enlightenment project’ was responsible for the organized mass violence of the later French Revolution and the still greater horrors perpetrated by imperialism, Communism, Fascism, and Nazism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁷

Israel proffers as an example ‘Michel Foucault’s overarching and powerful claim that the Enlightenment’s insistence on the primacy of reason was ultimately just a mask for the exercise of power’.⁵⁸ This is part of a general trend towards what Rodolphe Gasché identifies as ‘the postmodern interrogation of reason’ and the corollary ‘rediscovery of the irrational’, whose ultimate goal is to put ‘the foundation of Western culture into question’.⁵⁹ As we shall see, though, even before the arrival of Foucault and other likeminded theorists, the destructiveness of that ‘relentless rationalism’ – and its not only philosophical but also social, political, and even metaphysical consequences – would be at the very heart of the grievances of many absurdist artists.

This is not to say that they were pioneers in their distrust of rationality. In fact, ‘[a]lmost from the beginning, the [Enlightenment’s] stress on reason sparked currents of

⁵⁷ *Democratic Enlightenment*, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁹ ‘Postmodernism and Rationality’, p. 530.

discontent and uneasiness’, and it would not be long until ‘[a] romantic movement emerged to challenge the primacy of “rationality” in the Enlightenment view of human nature’.⁶⁰ Caught between those two clashing worldviews was a very significant thinker of modernity: Max Weber. Andrew Koch has produced a fine account of Weber’s conundrum: in short, the writings of the German sociologist and political economist ‘are marked by a tension between the requirements of Kantian rationalism and the demands of Weber’s personal value commitments’, that is to say, by ‘the conflict between his commitment to both modern rationalist epistemology and a romantic ontology’.⁶¹

This resulted from Weber’s perception of ‘rationality’ as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it ‘had been the foundation for an improved understanding of the environment’; on the other hand, ‘the march of “rational culture” was diminishing the worth of the individual and eroding the prospects for social development’.⁶² According to Koch, then, ‘Weber did not fully accept the priority of “rationalism” in human life, but at the same time he was not willing to give up the modernist paradigm of rational science. He sought a synthesis that would explain both the rational process of human understanding and the emotional commitments that he defined as essential components of the human personality’.⁶³

Alas, this conciliatory urge eventually gave in to what for Weber was the overwhelming evidence: ‘Weber was forced to conclude that tension, anomie and

⁶⁰ Koch, ‘Rationality, Romanticism and the Individual’, p. 123.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 124.

⁶² Ibid., p. 132.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 125.

dehumanization are the result of modernity and the march of “objective” reason’, ‘that the march of “science” and bureaucracy were inevitable and that “modernity” itself represented a valueless, nihilistic void’.⁶⁴

These conclusions are far from consensual, but they would clearly resonate with many disillusioned artists – and stir them into revolt against rationality. For Fotiade, the twentieth century’s ‘single unifying, pervasive concern with the Absurd’ is ‘perhaps less astonishing than the overall persistence of wilful attempts at questioning the validity of the classical rationalist discourse’⁶⁵ – and the two phenomena are most certainly related. In fact, the former elicits the latter, and the latter reinforces the former: the result is ‘a process by which reason comes to turn against itself and redeploy its violence against its own grounding principles’, which in turn ‘opens up the possibility of “awakening”’, or self-awareness.⁶⁶

This backlash against rationality is one of the ways that avant-garde artists preoccupied with the absurd deal with ‘the problem of modernity’, that is to say, the fact that ‘[t]he modern lifeworld is fragmented by the habits of rationality and colonized by systems that tend to override close, personal communication and even, to a considerable

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 125, 143.

⁶⁵ *Conceptions of the Absurd*, p. 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 68. Though it is unfortunate that most critics of absurdist literature and drama focus almost exclusively on that ‘negative, self-destructive movement’ (Ibid.), in detriment to its positive, constructive outcome (what Fotiade terms the ‘awakening’). Bennett is a noteworthy exception (see *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd* and *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*).

degree, language'.⁶⁷ But rationality (here meant specifically in Weber's sense) would hasten yet another cataclysm, one which – for some, spearheaded by Esslin – in essence links its origins (the 'Reason' of the Enlightenment) with its upshot (the absurdity of modern times): the death of God.

The steady 'decline of religious faith' in the West⁶⁸ is one of the momentous phenomena that can be traced back to the Enlightenment; it is no coincidence that, as 'religious doubt became a serious, widespread concern' in nineteenth-century Britain, 'Enlightenment arguments about rationalism, rights, and scientific method had circulated decades earlier, especially in continental Europe'.⁶⁹

The link between the two is causal – and unexpectedly complex. It is often supposed that reason, believed by the Enlightenment's philosophers to 'uncover the universal principles that govern the world' and to 'free humankind from ignorance and superstition',⁷⁰ would edge religious faith out of its bejewelled throne. This is a perfectly valid perspective, but the role of reason in the slow deterioration of religious faith can also be approached from another interesting and rather surprising angle, one that focuses not on a blind adherence to the precepts of rationality but on the very opposite of that – namely a strong suspicion of reason and the subsequent praise of doubt. Ayaan Hirsi Ali

⁶⁷ Cole Harris, 'Power, Modernity, and Historical Geography', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 81 (1991), 671-83 (p. 637).

⁶⁸ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 16.

⁶⁹ Christopher Lane, *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of Our Religious Uncertainty* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 2, 95.

⁷⁰ Koch, 'Rationality, Romanticism and the Individual', p. 123.

makes a cogent argument for this hypothesis:

Enlightenment thinkers, preoccupied with both individual freedom and secular and limited government, argued that human reason is fallible. They understood that reason is more than just rational thought; it is also a process of trial and error, the ability to learn from past mistakes. The Enlightenment cannot be fully appreciated without a strong awareness of just how frail human reason is. That is why concepts like doubt and reflection are central to any form of decision-making based on reason.⁷¹

This brought about a decisive change in the West: ‘Skepticism was no longer heresy; it was the sign increasingly of an open, questioning mind. And doubt was no longer anathema’.⁷² Because the sinews of epistemology were so closely entwined with metaphysics, the floodgates for agnosticism were flung open.

Whatever its causes, ‘the general decline in Christian belief’ in Europe⁷³ is nowadays taken for granted, and its repercussions are far-reaching. For John Cruickshank, writing before the publication of Esslin’s *Theatre of the Absurd*, such ‘loss of transcendence’ means that, for ‘many modern writers’, ‘the world is characterized by

⁷¹ *Apud* Lane, *The Age of Doubt*, p. 97.

⁷² Lane, *The Age of Doubt*, p. 149.

⁷³ John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 6.

lack of significance and coherence. Meaning has to be created, not found'.⁷⁴ Such 'erosion – indeed, rejection – of belief',⁷⁵ then, essentially 'pav[ed] the way for atheistic existentialism'.⁷⁶ This transcendental vacuum is prime breeding ground for absurdity; hence Esslin's assertion that the Theatre of the Absurd tackles 'the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties'.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Hinchliffe, in his attempt to better define the subject of his book *The Absurd*, considers it 'axiomatic that for Absurdity to exist, God must be dead'.⁷⁸

There is obviously a very strong correlation between the one and the other, but they need not necessarily coexist. Donald Crosby provides an apt example of just that: a Christian freshman could not bring himself to write a paper on Plato's philosophy, because he deemed it a waste of time. In his defence, Crosby argues, the student draws on the important nihilistic theme 'that human reason is bankrupt and incapable of resolving any of its own significant questions'.⁷⁹ The consequent absurdity of the world and of the human condition leaves no alternative to 'the essentially arbitrary act of the will the

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁵ Lane, *The Age of Doubt*, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 136.

⁷⁷ *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 292.

⁷⁸ *The Absurd*, p. vii.

⁷⁹ Donald Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 3.

student called “faith”⁸⁰ – or, in Camus’s terminology, a ‘leap’. This might strike one as being an extreme case, but in fact that line of reasoning is analogous to the one imputed to Søren Kierkegaard by Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*.⁸¹

In order to drive home the point that absurdity and faith need not clash, we begin the analysis of manifestations of resistance in absurdist works by zooming in on an artist whose fierce hostility towards Reason is at least partly motivated by rationality’s bid to overthrow metaphysics.

3. DANIIL KHARMS: ‘AGAINST KANT’

The term ‘absurdist literature’ may very well be ‘ill-defined and overplayed’,⁸² but it has proven irresistible for most readers and scholars confronted with any given ‘mini-, non- or anti-story’⁸³ written by the Russian avant-garde all-round artist Daniil Kharmis (1905-1942). Matvei Yankelevich, an editor and translator of Kharmis’s work, is very mistrustful of the label ‘absurdist’, but even he acknowledges the existence of ‘points of contact between Kharmis and the kind of post-war existential thinkers who sought to define the absurd, to employ it as a philosophical category’.⁸⁴ Indeed, Branko Jakovljevic

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸¹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. by Justin O’Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 46; subsequent references to this translation are given in the text identified by the abbreviation *MS*.

⁸² Yankelevich, ‘Introduction: The Real Kharmis’, p. 12.

⁸³ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 170.

⁸⁴ ‘Introduction: The Real Kharmis’, p. 12.

concedes that the absurdist interpretation of Kharms's work has been very fruitful,⁸⁵ despite considering it to be impervious to that and other kinds of interpretations.⁸⁶ Kharms does not merely resist such readings in a passive manner – his posture is one of continuous defiance in the face of attempts to establish connections of any sort;⁸⁷ moreover, his esteem for useless objects fuels his aesthetics' 'resistance to any kind of utilization, application or purpose'.⁸⁸

The most obvious manifestation of this can be readily found in the 'subversion of logic and causality'⁸⁹ which informs practically every single text of Kharms, as well as in his theoretical and poetic 'pronouncements against rationality'.⁹⁰ And herein lies the Kharmsian absurd, one which is grounded not on any existential principles,⁹¹ as is the case in many Western European absurdist writers, but instead on a 'resistance to logos'.⁹²

The resulting irrationality is far from representing a puerile means to a comical end; that is, the use of slapstick and non-sequitur in his micronarratives cannot be

⁸⁵ *Daniil Kharms: Writing and the Event* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), pp. 20-21, 23-25.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸⁷ Hilary Fink, 'The Kharmsian Absurd and the Bergsonian Comic: Against Kant and Causality', *The Russian Review*, 57 (1998), 526-538 (p. 530).

⁸⁸ Jakovljevic, *Daniil Kharms: Writing and the Event*, p. 35.

⁸⁹ Fink, 'The Kharmsian Absurd and the Bergsonian Comic', p. 527.

⁹⁰ Jakovljevic, *Daniil Kharms: Writing and the Event*, p. 193.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 75; see also Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 177.

properly understood if seen as a facile way of eliciting laughter. As it happens, such resistance is the natural consequence of a complex worldview which, Hilary Fink argues, is in reality steeped in the ‘deep-rooted tradition in Russian thought of Orthodox ontologism’.⁹³ According to this view, any reading of Kharm's stands to benefit from the acknowledgement of the impact of ‘nineteenth-century Romantic, anti-Enlightenment trend in Russian thought and culture’, which is characterized by its ‘distrust of pure reason’ and its reaction against ‘a Kantian overreliance on intellect as the sole means of attaining knowledge of the external world’.⁹⁴ Imbued in the ‘historic Russian distrust of analytical reason’, and sharing his fellow Russian modernists’ disdain for ‘materialism and positivism’, Kharm's would write ‘against Kant’ in the marginalia of what is today his most famous story (‘Blue Notebook N°10’), thereby signalling his rejection of ‘the restriction of human knowledge to phenomenal perception, excluding the spiritual or noumenal element of reality’.⁹⁵

This last aspect is key to understanding Kharm's, for whom the question of a higher power is far from settled: ‘For all his only too obvious absurdist credentials – the incongruity, the linguistic highlighting and the stress on language games, the logical inversions and the near (or sheer) nonsense – the Kharm'sian *œuvre* remains in a state of spiritual tension’.⁹⁶ His ‘religious fervor’,⁹⁷ then, helps explain his animus towards

⁹³ ‘The Kharm'sian Absurd and the Bergsonian Comic’, p. 526.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 534.

⁹⁶ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 116.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

rationality, and being ‘against Kant’ due (at least in part) to the German philosopher’s refusal ‘to recognize metaphysical truth, to place it on an equal footing with scientific truth’⁹⁸ clearly sets Kharms apart from the dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that ‘Kharms’s theory of the absurd is based, in large part, on his aversion to the notion of causality and so-called logical connection’;⁹⁹ the philosophical rejection of rationality is elevated to the status of organizing principle, and it is not only present in his diaries and treatises but also given artistic expression in his fiction, poetry, and plays. This resistance against such a basic cornerstone of all aspects of modernity in general and contemporary society in particular is precisely what binds Kharms to many other absurdist writers.

Yet there is another, related, more down-to-earth and equally significant kind of defiance which we will be analysing in this article: political resistance. The fact that most of Kharms’s works appear to be permeated with nonsense, or at least reminiscent of Russian *zaum* poetry, could induce one into believing them to be harmless tales, little islands of (non)meaning. As Cornwell points out, however, nonsense can be much more subversive than that: ‘Far from always being completely divorced from any semblance of surrounding reality, as may be commonly thought, nonsense does tend to interact with society or civilisation, whether as an expression of cultural or political alienation, or of other forms of oblique comment’.¹⁰⁰

So is there a muffled cry of ‘political alienation’ in Kharms’s vignettes?

⁹⁸ Fink, ‘The Kharmsian Absurd and the Bergsonian Comic’, p. 527.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 533.

¹⁰⁰ *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 19.

Answering to this kind of question can be difficult in a case like Kharm's, a writer who 'rarely, if ever, mentions politics in his writings'.¹⁰¹ Jakovljevic imagines a hypothetical reader's objection to the 'politicization of an author who vigorously insisted on his apolitical positions. I would like to ask them to think again: what does it mean to proclaim oneself apolitical in the face of a radical and violent politicization of every facet of human, and even non-human, life?'.¹⁰² But Peter Boxall, writing on the possibility of a political reading of Samuel Beckett, is not content with 'a critique that insists that even apoliticism is in some sense political',¹⁰³ and he explains why: 'If all forms of activity, even that of resistance to the category of the political, can be effortlessly co-opted into the political, then the meanings of the terms politics and resistance are in danger of being effaced'.¹⁰⁴

Kharm's's politicism or lack thereof is a thorny but crucial issue in Kharm'sian criticism, and the more scholars weigh in on it, the less unanimity there is. In *The Absurd in Literature*, Cornwell compiles other critics' opinions on this matter, adding that 'there is little doubt that, in Stalin's Russia, the experimental prose of Kharm's would have been, and should have been, construed as subversive'¹⁰⁵ – this is a more or less established fact, considering the fact that 'Kharm's and several of his friends were arrested and charged

¹⁰¹ Jakovljevic, *Daniil Kharm's: Writing and the Event*, p. 12.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. xi.

¹⁰³ 'Samuel Beckett: Towards a Political Reading', *Irish Studies Review*, 10 (2002), 159-70 (p. 159).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹⁰⁵ *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 169.

with anti-Soviet activities',¹⁰⁶ a direct consequence of the NKVD, the precursor of the KGB, having taken a very keen interest on them.¹⁰⁷

It is not uncommon, then, for the answer to the question asked above to be an emphatic 'yes'. For instance, Fink argues that 'Kharms's pointed alogicality may be read as a direct political challenge to the enforced Stalinist philosophy of optimistic determinism in the 1930s'.¹⁰⁸ For Fink, 'the environment of Stalinist Russia in the 1930s' oozes less than subtly from texts that feature 'arbitrary brutality and the "illogical" disappearance of people in the middle of the night'.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, then, 'Kharms's prosaic absurd is meant to reflect [...] the general incoherence of a world plunged into the madness of Stalinism'.¹¹⁰ Craig Brandist goes as far as to declare that Kharms's 'poetics of the absurd are employed in a deconstructive assault on the Stalinist monolith'.¹¹¹ On top of that (and interestingly for the purposes of this article), Brandist claims that the Russian writer combines his anti-rationalist agenda with his alleged political zeal by pinning absurdity to 'the adherence of the ruling class to a particular form of rationality [which] imposes a grim logic that distorts the whole social world'.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Yankelevich, 'Introduction: The Real Kharms', p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ Jakovljevic, *Daniil Kharms: Writing and the Event*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁸ 'The Kharmsian Absurd and the Bergsonian Comic', p. 534.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 529.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 528.

¹¹¹ 'Deconstructing the Rationality of Terror: William Blake and Daniil Kharms', *Comparative Literature*, 49 (1997), 59-75 (p. 65).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Even those more critical of the ‘trend [...] pervasive in scholarly words’ that causes Kharms to be ‘forced into political paradigms’¹¹³ go little further than giving a subdued rebuttal, one which does not completely preclude the existence of a political dimension. Yankelevich does grant that Kharms’s outlook on life and art ‘was incompatible with the prevailing ideology’, and that ‘[t]here is much truth to the narrative of Kharms’s victimhood at the hands of the Soviet regime’.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, he finds that ‘glossing Kharms’s texts as social or political allegory’ has its risks, as ‘implicit in the approach of such readings is the belief that they function mimetically, or as “coded” messages decrying Soviet life’).¹¹⁵ So while Yankelevich concedes that the political aspect of Kharms’s work should be taken into account, he argues for ‘a fuller view of [...] a context that did not consist only – or even primarily – of Stalin and politics’.¹¹⁶

In the end, however, the general consensus seems to be that Kharms’s resistance, besides being prompted by metaphysical and epistemological concerns, is inescapably (and most likely even in spite of himself) political as well. One can argue that Kharms is a perfect example of how ‘the thematic expression of the absurd split between man and his surrounding world’,¹¹⁷ regardless of any lack of topographical detail, explicit satirical purpose, or even cause and effect, is virtually indissociable from a confrontation of one’s actual cultural, social, and political reality. Around the time of Kharms’s death, as yet

¹¹³ Yankelevich, ‘Introduction: The Real Kharms’, p. 27.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 24, 27.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

¹¹⁷ Fink, ‘The Kharmsian Absurd and the Bergsonian Comic’, p. 528.

another war shook the world, the writer and thinker most dedicated to the notion of the absurd would begin to positively embrace such awareness and engagement.

4. ALBERT CAMUS: A POLITICAL RESISTANCE TO THE ABSURD

Due to the relatively limited scope of this article, there are, admittedly, several philosophers whose invaluable contributions to our understanding of the concept of absurdity are not discussed at length, Kierkegaard and Sartre being two of the most conspicuous absences. But no analysis of the absurd as resistance is at all conceivable without taking into consideration the evolution of the thought of Albert Camus (1913-1960).

At times provocative and aphoristic in tone, Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, first published in 1942, represents his most thorough attempt to define the absurd. For Camus, it is not the world itself that is absurd; 'what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world' (*MS*, p. 20). This means that the absurd is not an essential state; it is something that depends on perception, on a subject and an object, and, most crucially for this article, on the clash between the two: 'The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation' (*MS*, pp. 28-29). As it is, 'this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' (*MS*, p. 26) is impossible to resolve, since those two propositions – the 'appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle' – cannot be reconciled (*MS*, 49).

These views reinforce the notion that, regardless of the perspective, rationality (or the irrational) is a key aspect of the absurd.¹¹⁸ But whereas Kharmis launches an all-out attack on rationality, the author of *Sisyphé* takes a much more measured stance. For Camus, extreme rationality and extreme irrationality are both ‘leaps’, so while they may provide some comfort (*MS*, p. 46), it is of an illusory sort, seeing that ‘the world is neither so rational nor so irrational. It is unreasonable and only that’ (*MS*, p. 47).

This is a necessary caveat for a philosopher ‘clearly marked’ in his earlier years ‘as a potential nihilist’,¹¹⁹ all the while vigorously denouncing nihilism. Camus’s thoughts on the possibility of art in an absurd world are revealing of this tension: ‘For an absurd work of art to be possible, thought in its most lucid form must be involved in it. But at the same time thought must not be apparent except as the regulating intelligence’ (*MS*, p. 94). The implication of this is that thought must be the work’s life force and simultaneously the target of its repudiation (*MS*, p. 94); also, the work is created without being part of a search for ‘the end, the meaning, and the consolation of a life. Creating or not creating changes nothing. The absurd creator does not prize his work. He could repudiate it’ (*MS*, p. 94).

The mental gymnastics involved in justifying the creation of a meaningless and inconsequential work of art, or the possibility of happiness in absurdity, have caused some scholars to criticize his paradoxical response to the absurd as being ‘confusing and

¹¹⁸ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 8.

¹¹⁹ Fred Willhoite Jr, ‘Albert Camus’ Politics of Rebellion’, *The Western Political Quarterly*, 14 (1961), 400-14 (p. 413).

confused'.¹²⁰ In Cruickshank's opinion, *Sisyphé*, with all its 'somewhat sterile conclusions',¹²¹ is best remembered as a stepping stone for the later development of Camus's philosophy. Such development would in effect amount to a full and unflinching acknowledgement of reality and its prosaic but very pressing threats. For Cruickshank, this was the logical solution of the 'practical and logical difficulties' of a 'doctrine of fundamental absurdity';¹²² Camus would be led by 'his refusal to make moral concessions to intellectual abstractions'¹²³ – which is evident even in *Sisyphé*, being the source of no small amount of friction between the existential nihilist premises and the humanist conclusions – and realise that the emphasis would have to lay 'on concrete situations rather than abstract attitudes'.¹²⁴

This change took place in his personal life before it made its way into his writing – around the time when he returned to North Africa in 1941.¹²⁵ Cruickshank notes that, although Camus had begun to write the first draft of *La Peste* around that time,¹²⁶ 'the writing of *La Peste* in its final form did not begin until 1944',¹²⁷ and the novel 'would

¹²⁰ Hinchliffe, *The Absurd*, p. 36.

¹²¹ *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, p. 91.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 7

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

only be finished in 1947'.¹²⁸ In the meantime, and according to Fred Willhoite Jr., his 'active participation in the Resistance' is certain to 'have affected his point of view',¹²⁹ and '[t]his distinctively individual experience of rebellion' was 'later conceptualized by Camus in his attempt to delineate its nature and significance'.¹³⁰ And so it came to pass that his personal experience irremediably altered his philosophical system; his 'newly articulated political humanism' would find expression in *La Peste*,¹³¹ where '[t]he moral solipsism of the absurd man is somehow broken into by a feeling that his personal revolt is grounded in an experience common to his fellows'.¹³²

Thus although *La Peste* is 'a novel about the absurd'¹³³ it is also, by Camus's own admission, 'a chronicle of the Resistance'.¹³⁴ The novel's political dimension is unmistakable yet also intricately intermingled with the absurdist one: there are 'two figurative meanings from the symbol of the plague since there are clear and repeated allusions both to the German Occupation and to man's metaphysical dereliction in the world'.¹³⁵ These two powerful and concurrent meanings illustrate well the tension between the absurd and revolt which would feature predominantly in Camus's later

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

¹²⁹ 'Albert Camus' Politics of Rebellion', p. 402.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., p. 403.

¹³³ Philip Thody *apud* Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 116.

¹³⁴ Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, p. 172.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 171, his emphasis.

thought.¹³⁶

After the rather abstract musings in *Sisyphé* and the reflections based on real and personally witnessed events in *La Peste*, in *L'Homme révolté* (1951) Camus's evidently pivotal concept of resistance to absurdity turned away from detached philosophical deliberation and continued to develop 'along more historical and political lines'.¹³⁷ In this novel, he essentially thematized the making of 'a vital distinction between the negativity (and totality) of nihilism and the at least potential positivity (despite historical events) of rebellion'.¹³⁸ The level of engagement with contemporary society and politics is such that one may discuss not merely the possible existence but indeed the exact nature of 'Camus' political doctrine'.¹³⁹ This completes the outward development of his philosophy: Camus's all-important concept of rebellion ceases to be 'only an individual and collective refusal of death and absurdity in the name of nature and happiness; it comes to imply resistance to physical or political oppression as well'.¹⁴⁰

It is interesting to see just how much Camus's idea of resistance differs from Kharms's, given their common starting point: the idea of absurdity. Kharms welcomes the absurd as a part of life, but also as a means of resistance against the stifling rationality, indeed as evidence of the stubborn survival of God – 'The world is absurd,

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 130.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

¹³⁸ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 117.

¹³⁹ Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, p. 133.

¹⁴⁰ Willhoite Jr, 'Albert Camus' Politics of Rebellion', p. 404.

and therefore faith is possible'.¹⁴¹ Moreover, the Russian writer never seemed keen on getting overtly mixed up in politics, even in the comparatively safe context of his utopian project for a domestic journal.¹⁴²

Camus too considers the acknowledgement of absurdity a *sine qua non*, but he turns Kharm's equation on its head; his 'belief and trust in reason'¹⁴³ lead him to argue instead for the instrumentalization of rationality (in due moderation, as we have seen) against absurdity. Furthermore, this, Camus contends, should be done in a decidedly concrete way: although more existentialist (and atheistic) in nature than any of Kharm's more perfunctory statements, his call for a 'protracted protest against death'¹⁴⁴ is to be answered as much by a general rebellion against the absurdity of the human condition as by a steely defiance of repression of any kind and a strong disavowal of the nihilistic principles which, according to Camus, prop up totalitarian ideologies and regimes.

Also unlike Kharm, the French-Algerian philosopher, in his search for a new paradigm, never seems much interested in challenging literary conventions. During his last decade among the living, several dramatic works would convey concerns similar to his own, but they would go 'a step further' than him and Sartre not only by integrating the absurd into the content of their texts but also by having the absurd influence their form.¹⁴⁵ That was one way many European avant-garde artists found to rebel against not

¹⁴¹ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 10.

¹⁴² Jakovljevic, *Daniil Kharm's: Writing and the Event*, p. 12.

¹⁴³ Bennett, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁴ Willhoite Jr, 'Albert Camus' Politics of Rebellion', p. 406.

¹⁴⁵ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 17.

only the intrinsic frailty but also the extrinsic oppression of human beings – be they lost in the vast context of an indifferent universe or trapped in the narrow confines of a prison cell for political dissidents.

5. THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD AND OTHER ABSURDITIES

‘If a definition of the philosophy of absurdist drama were articulated’, Anne Quinney writes, ‘it would include the expression of the belief in a godless universe where human existence has no meaning or purpose, where all communication breaks down, and where logical construction and argument give way to both irrational and illogical speech’.¹⁴⁶ This attempt at definition – with which most scholars on the absurd would likely agree, regardless of their feelings towards their subject matter – is accurate and gloomy in equal measure, in that it *is* mostly accurate, but not necessarily holy writ, and it *is* rather gloomy, but not necessarily (or indeed almost ever) to the point of sentimentalist despair or nihilistic indifference – and this is part of its accuracy. One of the aims of this article is precisely to challenge the image of absurdist literature as a bleak, languid, whimsical, getting-nowhere-fast requiem by demonstrating its sheer vitality. Such energy, so the argument goes, is inevitable given its reactive thrust and its expression of an irrepressible dissatisfaction, be it the searing *Weltschmerz* caused by the absurdity of the human condition or the out-and-out rage against a particular sociopolitical status quo.

Some of the best known works from authors associated with Esslin’s Theatre of the Absurd are perfect examples of this, in particular Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinocéros*. It has

¹⁴⁶ ‘Excess and Identity: the Franco-Romanian Ionesco Combats *Rhinocerotitis*’, *South Central Review*, 24 (2007), 36-52 (p. 36).

all the trappings of absurdist drama (it is set in a godless universe, communication breaks down, logic and reason give way to the irrational), and yet it is, very plainly, a political allegory. Critics like Richard Danner, whose bold opening gambit in an article is that ‘*Rhinocéros* is not an allegory’,¹⁴⁷ have to fight not only the bulk of the play’s actual textual evidence but also the opinion of Ionesco himself. ‘Unless he has been deliberately mystifying us, his assessment of the import of *Rhinocéros* is clear’: for its writer, ‘*Rhinocéros* is indeed allegorical’.¹⁴⁸ His ‘extensive and quite specific’ remarks on the matter¹⁴⁹ include the rather categorical claim that *Rhinocéros* is ‘sans doute une pièce antinazie’.¹⁵⁰ The idea of the Author with capital ‘A’ may or may not be dead, depending on one’s theoretical persuasion, but the truth is that ‘*Rhinocéros* has been read as a satire of totalitarianism, the police state, and demagoguery as well as a moral call to question the rise of these phenomena in the twentieth century’, and its ‘hyperbole and outrageous fantasy have been read as metaphors for historical events of the twentieth century – ranging from the Nazi occupation of France to the French persecution of Algerians’.¹⁵¹

Other instances of political satire and allegory abound, especially in Eastern Europe. Many critics have noted both the ‘East European dissident *ambiance*’¹⁵² and the

¹⁴⁷ Richard Danner, ‘Bérenger’s Dubious Defense of Humanity in *Rhinocéros*’, *The French Review*, 53 (1979), 207-14 (p. 207).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ionesco *apud* Danner, *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Quinney, ‘Excess and Identity’, p. 36.

¹⁵² Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 150.

fact that, despite their undeniably absurd character, Eastern European absurdist plays are manifestly tethered to their immediate sociopolitical context. This is why Goetz-Stankiewicz maintains that '[t]he playful dictum "Nothing is as exciting as the truth" could be considered the all but playful motto of absurd theatre in Eastern Europe'.¹⁵³

For example, Cornwell notes that Poland is home to 'a number of fascinating practitioners of the surreal and the absurd', citing Stanisław Witkiewicz, Bruno Schulz, and the early work of Witold Gombrowicz as noteworthy examples.¹⁵⁴ Edward Czerwinski, in his article on Tadeusz Różewicz, argues that 'Różewicz, like Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Norwid, and Wyspiański, to mention only those of the mainstream, has transposed the contemporary Polish scene with all its problems onto the universal stage of the Theater of the Absurd'.¹⁵⁵ Czerwinski too mentions Witkiewicz, who 'is regarded as a precursor of the Theater of the Absurd', and sees in Jerzy Broszkiewicz and Sławomir Mrożek 'two of Poland's finest dramatists writing in the idiom of the Theater of the Absurd'.¹⁵⁶

Another case in point is Czechoslovakia. 'The "Thaw" years in Czechoslovakia', writes Cornwell, 'saw an influx of absurdist theatre'.¹⁵⁷ Forerunners of this trend include Josef and Karel Čapek, thanks to their 'science-fiction robot saga *R.U.R.* (1920) and the

¹⁵³ 'The Metamorphosis of the Theatre of the Absurd', p. 54.

¹⁵⁴ *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 89.

¹⁵⁵ 'Tadeusz Różewicz and the Jester-Priest Metaphor', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 13 (1969), 217-28 (p. 221).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 228, nn. 9, 4.

¹⁵⁷ *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 148.

satirical “Entomological Review” drama *The Insect Play*.¹⁵⁸ For Cornwell, the intent of these plays is political, though ‘not only, or merely, political’.¹⁵⁹ The most illustrious example of absurdist drama in Czechoslovakia is Václav Havel, a celebrated writer turned politician¹⁶⁰ capable of blending in his works ‘avant-garde dramaturgy’ with ‘political satire’, whose intent is ‘to expose the absurdities of the socialist system in particular’.¹⁶¹

There is a myriad of notable, more isolated instances of absurdist works in which social and political criticism plays an important role. Debating possible reasons for Irish man of letters Brian O’Nolan’s adaptation of the Čapek brothers’ *The Insect Play*, Cornwell speculates that O’Nolan, an absurdist writer with a ‘dim view of the Irish political scene and its machinations’,¹⁶² ‘must have seen a parallel worth drawing between the post-first-World-War ethos of *The Insect Play* [...] and a confused Second World War (nominally neutral) situation pertaining in Ireland, twenty years after the Irish civil war’.¹⁶³ The works of women absurdist writers such as Liudmila Petrushevskaja and Margaret Hollingsworth are also worthy of note, due to their politically-aware brand of

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 148-49.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 150.

¹⁶¹ Paul Trenskey, ‘Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd’, *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 13 (1969), 42-65 (p. 47).

¹⁶² *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 254.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 253.

absurdism which includes a keen exploration of gender dynamics.¹⁶⁴ Portugal, under dictatorship, saw Jaime Salazar Sampaio write in 1961 *O Pescador à Linha*, an allegory in which Sampaio surreptitiously inserted elements of protest with clearly political implications.¹⁶⁵ Absurdist incursions into politics have likewise been undertaken ‘by, in very different ways, Pinter, Stoppard and, say, Edward Bond’.¹⁶⁶ Lastly, reference should also be made to Benedikts Kalnačs’s identification of the absurd as one of the six kinds of ‘characteristic manifestations of anti-colonial thought in the Baltic countries’.¹⁶⁷

It may be surprising at first sight, but in truth the connection between the absurd and anti-colonialism is perfectly defensible. Odun Balogun, in his article on absurdist African literature, argues that, although ‘there are not as many absurdist artists in Africa as in Europe and America’,¹⁶⁸ it is nevertheless a force to be reckoned with. According to Balogun, the absurd ‘has always been manifest in African literature both oral and written’,¹⁶⁹ and its presence in contemporary African literature is seen as ‘a manifestation

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 292.

¹⁶⁵ Sebastiana Fadda, *O Teatro do Absurdo em Portugal*, trans. into Portuguese by José Colaço Barreiros (Lisbon: Edições Cosmos, 1998), pp. 311, 316, 313.

¹⁶⁶ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 311.

¹⁶⁷ Benedikts Kalnačs, ‘Postcolonial Narratives, Decolonial Options: The Baltic Experience’, in *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, ed. by Dobrota Pucherová and Róbert Gráfik (Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015), pp. 47-64 (p. 58).

¹⁶⁸ ‘Characteristics of Absurdist African Literature’, p. 42.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

of the world-wide malaise dominating all spheres of modern life’;¹⁷⁰ this is highly reminiscent of Esslin, and indeed the European absurdist tradition is credited by Balogun with having a decisive influence¹⁷¹ – much to the chagrin of ‘vocal African critics’ of such perceived eurocentrism, who ‘have persistently condemned the encouragement of modernist tendencies in African writing’.¹⁷²

However, Balogun posits that contemporary absurdist African literature is also ‘a product of a specific historical and racial experience molded by slavery, colonization, and neo-colonialism’,¹⁷³ and it is easy to understand why: ‘The high level of misgovernment’ means that ‘the reality of post-Independence is a far cry from the utopian heaven it seemed to promise’,¹⁷⁴ and ‘[t]he degree of pessimism and cynicism [in] this disparity between expectations and reality’¹⁷⁵ is certainly akin to the sort of dissension and discontent that ignites the more politically-minded absurdist plays.

But even though Balogun argues that contemporary African literature of the absurd ‘developed as a reaction to the general world malaise and the absurd conditions of modern Africa’¹⁷⁶ (a combination that is very much akin to the factors that characterize the Eastern European Theatre of the Absurd, for instance), he also claims that ‘African

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

absurdist literature [...] differs in style from the European tradition'.¹⁷⁷ Instead of relying on 'absurd form' to 'reflect absurd content', 'modern African absurdist writers use normal, rational and realistic devices combined with hyperbole, irony and satire to convey the absurd'.¹⁷⁸

This "unabsurdist" mode of presenting the absurd' is the dominating feature of the 'African modern practice of the absurd',¹⁷⁹ and Balogun enumerates some of its most significant practitioners: Tutuola, whose *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1953) is best read allegorically;¹⁸⁰ Femi Osofisan, who in *Kolera Kolej* (1975) depicts 'a world ruled by an absurd logic [...] in a highly lucid and realistic language';¹⁸¹ Kole Omotoso, who in *the combat* (1972) portrays the gradual shift from logic to illogicality in an 'even more realistic' and subtle manner than Osofian;¹⁸² and Taban lo Liyong, 'an exciting African avant-garde writer'¹⁸³ whose short fiction not only includes instances of 'lexical and semantic absurdity' and 'absurdity of illogical reasoning',¹⁸⁴ but also 'an obvious satire of African heads of state'.¹⁸⁵ Balogun singles out Taban lo Livong for praise, asserting that

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 45, 43.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 43, 44.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

‘Africans who read [the story] “Fixions” will become more critical of their puppet-heads of state’.¹⁸⁶ ‘The corrective objective of African absurdist literature’,¹⁸⁷ Balogun argues, is particularly evident in Taban lo Livong’s work: ‘His stories are comprehensible and purposeful. They present absurdity not as the summation of life but as a comment on the negative aspects of life, and their objective is both satiric and corrective’.¹⁸⁸

The claim, then, is that ‘the absurd for the African fulfills the same purpose as satire – a way of correction. The African absurdist may have a pessimistic cynical vision but he has not yet despaired’.¹⁸⁹ This attitude, for Balogun, is in stark contrast with the one held by the ‘European absurdist’, who is described as an incorrigible nihilist in all but name.¹⁹⁰ Hopefully, this article will have provided enough examples to the contrary for there not to be any need to address this particular issue in further detail.

Yet it is clear that, in much of absurd criticism (some important exceptions being Cornwell and Bennett),¹⁹¹ the spectre of Esslin’s *Theatre of the Absurd* looms large, and the negative definitions it sparks are often too Manichean to be accurate, and therefore useful. In the last section of this article, we will address the second main aim of this paper by looking at what separates and what unites the different conceptions of the absurd in

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*; Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd* and *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*.

literature.

6. THE TOXICITY OF TAXONOMIES, AND THE QUEST FOR COMMON GROUND

Martin Esslin is fairly clear on what he perceives to be the ‘dual purpose’ of the Theatre of the Absurd.¹⁹² One of them, ‘the most easily accessible, and therefore most widely recognized’, is ‘the satirical exposure of the absurdity of inauthentic ways of life’.¹⁹³ This is the facet of the absurd we have delved into in more depth in the previous section. Yet Esslin regards this ‘social criticism’ as ‘far from being its most essential or most significant feature’ – that would be the thematization of the universal condition of humankind, ‘man stripped of the accidental circumstances of social position or historical context, confronted with the basic choices, the basic situations of his existence’.¹⁹⁴

According to this notion, then, the most important common denominator of the miscellaneous plays examined in *The Theatre of the Absurd* is the existential question, and consequently the political dimension of the Eastern European practitioners’ works (which is acknowledged and briefly analysed by Esslin himself) is subsidiary, as it were. For critics more focused on the Eastern European variant of the Theatre of the Absurd, the balance of power between these two sides is inverted: according to Goetz-Stankiewicz, ‘the best writers of Eastern Europe’ use absurdity as a cover, a weapon for

¹⁹² *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 291.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

political attack,¹⁹⁵ and a tool to ‘address themselves directly to their audiences’, who are ‘denied the truth’, ‘whose minds have been choked with slogans, and whose lives are dictated by irrational absolute values’.¹⁹⁶

These two views cannot be said to be in contradiction, because Esslin’s study is firmly anchored in the Parisian literary scene in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and the phenomenon examined by Goetz-Stankiewicz pertains mostly to works written by writers from countries under Soviet cultural and political influence throughout the Cold War. For all the provisos and qualifications, there remains a fault line in scholarly research on the absurd which tends to divide a metaphysical West and a politically engaged East. The impetus of the theory put forward by Esslin and later developed by other scholars is at the same time universalistic and inward-looking, with an emphasis on the blurring (or downright neglect) of national cultures’ borders, histories, and contemporary realities; conversely, the definition of the Eastern European version of the Theatre of the Absurd is much more topical, and often made in negative relation to its Western counterpart¹⁹⁷ – or, more accurately put, to the concept advocated

¹⁹⁵ ‘Slawomir Mrozek: Two Forms of the Absurd’, *Contemporary Literature*, 12 (1971), 188-203 (pp. 188-89).

¹⁹⁶ Goetz-Stankiewicz, ‘The Metamorphosis of the Theatre of the Absurd’, p. 55.

¹⁹⁷ ‘In the Western world the appeal of absurd drama is largely based on the feeling that it reveals the senselessness of life [...]. It is regarded as a truly “existential” theatre [...]. The recent wave of absurd plays in Eastern Europe is derived from a wholly different conception [...:] the context is not metaphysical but social’ (ibid., pp. 190-91). See also Goetz-Stankiewicz, ‘Slawomir Mrozek’, pp. 57, 61.

by Esslin.

Most of the literary critics mentioned in this paper offer such generalizations as a helpful rule of thumb, not as dogma. However, given the absurd's famous elusiveness (of which this article is surely further evidence), its literary manifestations are of such varied nature that even generalizations are prone to fail. Hinchliffe's idea that true absurdity is not conceivable without loss of faith rules out of consideration the likes of Kierkegaard, Kharrms, and, in a way, Flann O'Brien. Even the 'universalist' and 'existentialist' dimensions, so often considered key to the Theatre of the Absurd in particular and the feeling of absurdity in general, is none too seldom lacking. The case of Kharrms is again paradigmatic, and reading Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* primarily from an existentialist perspective requires a leap of sorts.

This may help explain the relative dearth of attempts at defining the absurd. Since the 1960s, a decade that bore witness to Esslin's ground-breaking thesis, Brustein's ambitious account of modern drama, and Wellwarth's penchant for categorical statements, few have ventured to pinpoint what exactly can be said to bind together playwrights, novelists, and thinkers from such disparate backgrounds. The prudent critic attempting to provide a general account of the absurd in literature and drama may compile many possible definitions without ever settling on one, which is the path chosen by Cornwell in his encyclopaedic study on the subject; or else may shy away from a thematic reading and prefer to focus on strictly formal aspects, an approach recently favoured by Bennett. As *modi operandi*, both are quite sensible: besides being capable of yielding useful insights, either of them represents a particularly tempting choice when one considers the sheer heterogeneity of the practitioners of the absurd and their

motivations and worldviews.

One of the most intriguing illustrations of that heterogeneity is embodied in a single writer: Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). Beckett is consistently pronounced apolitical, though that appears to be an oversimplification (see Boxall); Beckett's work for the Resistance is just one example of how his 'political consciousness, while never flaunted, never faltered'.¹⁹⁸ So claims that Beckett's work has a 'universal' quality to it do not stand up to scrutiny for long. Furthermore, most interesting for this article is his novel *Watt*, much maligned by the author himself¹⁹⁹ and best summed up as 'a metaphysical quest, or parody thereof, whereby Watt, applying logic and reason in accordance with the Cartesian "Method", finds that rational attempts to understand his master through his accidents leads not to substantive knowledge but to the asylum'.²⁰⁰ It is a vicious indictment of 'the validity of the classical rationalist discourse', and there is precious little in the way of existential angst over man's predicament. Even so, '[t]he philosophical underpinning of *Watt* may well be as absurdist, or as apparently nihilistic, as much else in Beckett's *œuvre*', and it may 'be seen as in many ways the epitome of Beckettian absurdism'.²⁰¹

Another telling example is Sławomir Mrożek, whose works, in accordance with the retroactively established precepts of the Eastern European Theatre of the Absurd,

¹⁹⁸ G. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 499.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 629.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature*, p. 235.

contain a sustained political onslaught.²⁰² Notwithstanding, Daniel Gerould has found a crucial parallel between Mrozek's 'obsession with dialectical polarities of nature and culture, instinct and reason' and the 'characteristics typical of many French writers in the Age of Enlightenment'.²⁰³ Gerould actually sets 'Mrozek's relationship to the theatre of the absurd' in opposition with 'his critique of extreme rationalism', which 'has its roots in the eighteenth century'.²⁰⁴

As a matter of fact, these two facets of Mrozek's need not clash. Indeed, they may be symbiotic. When the sundry authors and works associated with the absurd are viewed together, a pattern emerges: they all have rationality, or the irrational, at the heart of their concerns. Perhaps the one thing they will often have in common is not existentialist anxiety, nor rejection of transcendentalism, nor use of nonsense, nor explicit political engagement, but rather what Gerould calls the 'critique of extreme rationalism'.

This is not to say that all absurdist literary and dramatic texts are explicitly or mainly *about* Reason. Nevertheless, it is interesting how most of those works seem to be engaging with the philosophical debate around rationality. To consider but one viable line of inquiry, one need only compare the concerns of absurdist writers with those of Max Weber. Weber's prescient critique provides warnings against the many nefarious consequences of hyperrationality, such as the 'disenchantment' so loathed by Kharms;

²⁰² Goetz-Stankiewicz, 'Slawomir Mrozek', pp. 188-89.

²⁰³ 'Contexts for *VatŹlav*: Mrozek and the Eighteenth Century', *Modern Drama*, 27 (1984), 21-40 (p. 21).

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

the rational mechanisation abhorred by Weber²⁰⁵ as much as by twentieth-century Eastern European artists;²⁰⁶ and the bureaucratic ‘rational culture’ whose famous iron cage ‘erodes the possibility for freedom as it destroys the possibility for truly individual conduct’²⁰⁷ and is therefore so inimical to the existentialist concerns of many practitioners of the absurd discussed by Esslin and Cornwell.

One could elaborate on this line of thought and plausibly argue that the ‘critique of extreme rationalism’, or the ‘interrogation of reason’, can either be voiced in a pure form, uncompromising and thoroughgoing (for example, Kharms and other members of OBERIU, the Western European Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett’s *Watt*); or with due reservations, limiting itself to a denunciation of the excesses of rationality (for example, Camus, the Eastern European Theatre of the Absurd, the African writers analysed by Balogun). Either way, though, there seems to be a common denominator, a unifying factor. This shows just how shrewd it is of Fotiade to link the twentieth century’s ‘single unifying, pervasive concern with the Absurd’ with the ‘wilful attempts at questioning the validity of the classical rationalist discourse’.²⁰⁸

Having said that, the fact that the critique of reason is carried out with varying

²⁰⁵ Koch, ‘Rationality, Romanticism and the Individual’, p. 140.

²⁰⁶ Goetz-Stankiewicz, ‘The Metamorphosis of the Theatre of the Absurd
‘Metamorphosis’, p. 61.

²⁰⁷ Koch, ‘Rationality, Romanticism and the Individual’, p. 142.

²⁰⁸ *Conceptions of the Absurd*, p. 1.

degrees of enthusiasm among practitioners of the absurd²⁰⁹ means that a more complex definition of the resistance(s) present in absurdist literature and drama is called for, and it might be more productive to take a leaf out of Wim Tigges's book. Tigges claims that there are two main types of literary nonsense, the 'Learic' and 'Carrollian' types;²¹⁰ although they are more or less opposites, there is a fair amount of overlap between them,²¹¹ and Tigges suggests that the best literary nonsense is the one that 'which does not easily fall to one side of the scale'.²¹²

Seeing the interplay between absurdity, rationality and resistance through a spectrum can be very fruitful. In such a configuration, one camp, led by Kharms, would think of the absurd – partially inspired by Fotiade's notion of the 'logically

²⁰⁹ Thus Goetz-Stankiewicz argues that a 'deep mistrust of human reason permeates the theatre of the absurd of the West' in a way that does not compare to the views held by '[t]he playwright of Eastern Europe', who, like Camus, 'works on a different premise. He has not lost his trust in reason' ('The Metamorphosis of the Theatre of the Absurd', p. 60). Similarly, and as we have already seen, Balogun believes that '[t]he African absurdist may have a pessimistic cynical vision but he has not yet despaired' ('Characteristics of Absurdist African Literature', p. 46), as opposed to the 'Western man', who has allegedly 'plunged into an agonizing spiritual crisis characterized by pessimism and despair' (ibid., p. 42), which in turn would justify his more radical abandonment of rational devices (ibid., p. 44).

²¹⁰ *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 1988), p. 85.

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 86.

²¹² Ibid., p. 227.

unverifiable',²¹³ for the purposes of this working definition the absurd may simply be that which reason and logic cannot contain, reach or explain – as a useful tool for the resistance of reason; the other camp, led by Camus, would stand for the resistance of absurdity through reason.

In this scenario, the golden mean would be the works that best show the possibilities of overlap between both camps. Due to its richness and intricacy, it could be argued, following Tigges's suggestion, that the best absurdist writing is to be found in the intersection of the Kharms-Camus Venn diagram. And it is safe to assume that Beckett, the most consistently lauded writer associated with the absurd, and often deemed its key and link,²¹⁴ would enjoy pride of place in the middle of that road. Such a position in the spectrum necessarily entails paradox, which is the defining feature of this golden mean: there is a permanent dialectical tension between the dissatisfaction with absurdity and the inadequacy of reason, the need to communicate and the failure of language, a certain philosophical detachment and a perhaps surreptitious political engagement.²¹⁵ The perplexing and 'defiant valuation of powerlessness, defeat, resignation, and

²¹³ *Conceptions of the Absurd*, p. 54.

²¹⁴ Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 18.

²¹⁵ The relevance – indeed significance – of the paradox for absurdist literature, though originally but imperfectly addressed by Wellwarth, is much more insightfully explored by Bennett: 'The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd were made up of a clatter of different viewpoints. These differing viewpoints, usually unresolved, created the paradoxical world of the play. What heightened the paradox was the fact that not only were the differing viewpoints unresolved, but largely, so was the play' (ibid., pp. 18-19).

disengagement, which uncovered a paradoxical notion of revolt' originally ascribed to existential thought of the interwar years by Fotiade²¹⁶ can also be said to play a crucial role in much of Beckett's later *œuvre*.

Thus in Beckett, as in other absurdist writings, 'I can't go on' must immediately be followed by 'I'll go on'.²¹⁷ And it is precisely this attitude that unites the practitioners of the absurd: common to Kharms, Camus, and Beckett is their disruptive fervour, and the inescapable imperative to resist, to subvert, never to surrender, be it to soul-eroding hyperrationality or to the absurdity of life (generally speaking or in a particular sociopolitical context); the imperative, as it were, to 'go on'.

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²¹⁶ *Conceptions of the Absurd*, p. 105.

²¹⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), p. 407.